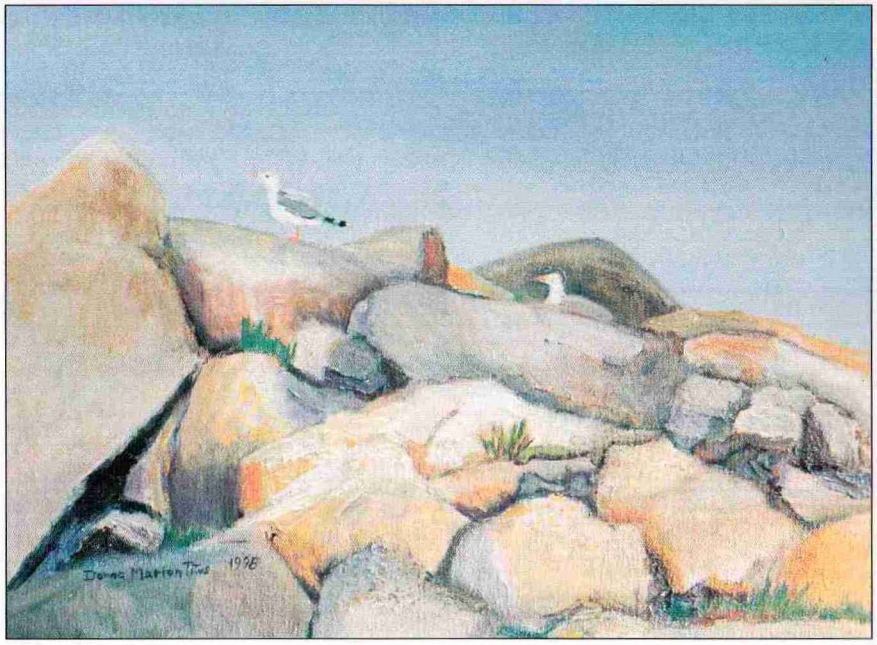

Rocks & Gulls
Donna Marion Titus
o/c 16 x 20

DONNA MARION TITUS is a long-time "friend of Celia." For over 20 years she has studied the life and work of Celia Laighton Thaxter (1835-1894); poet, writer, and artist who lived on White Island, Smuttynose, Appledore and Star. Titus gives an informal and lively one-woman dramatic impersonation of Celia Thaxter to schools, clubs, libraries and historical societies.

A native of Newburyport, Massachusetts, she grew up near salt water and feels at home in the seacoast environment.

About this book she says, "Letters tell a lot about the writer and the age she lived in. It was a joy to work on this particular collection of Celia's letters which shows so well her considerable knowledge and deep love of the natural world."

An historian and a painter (oils), Titus has spent years working and painting the islands. She says, "You could spend a lifetime studying and learning new things at the Isles of Shoals and there would still be more to know!"

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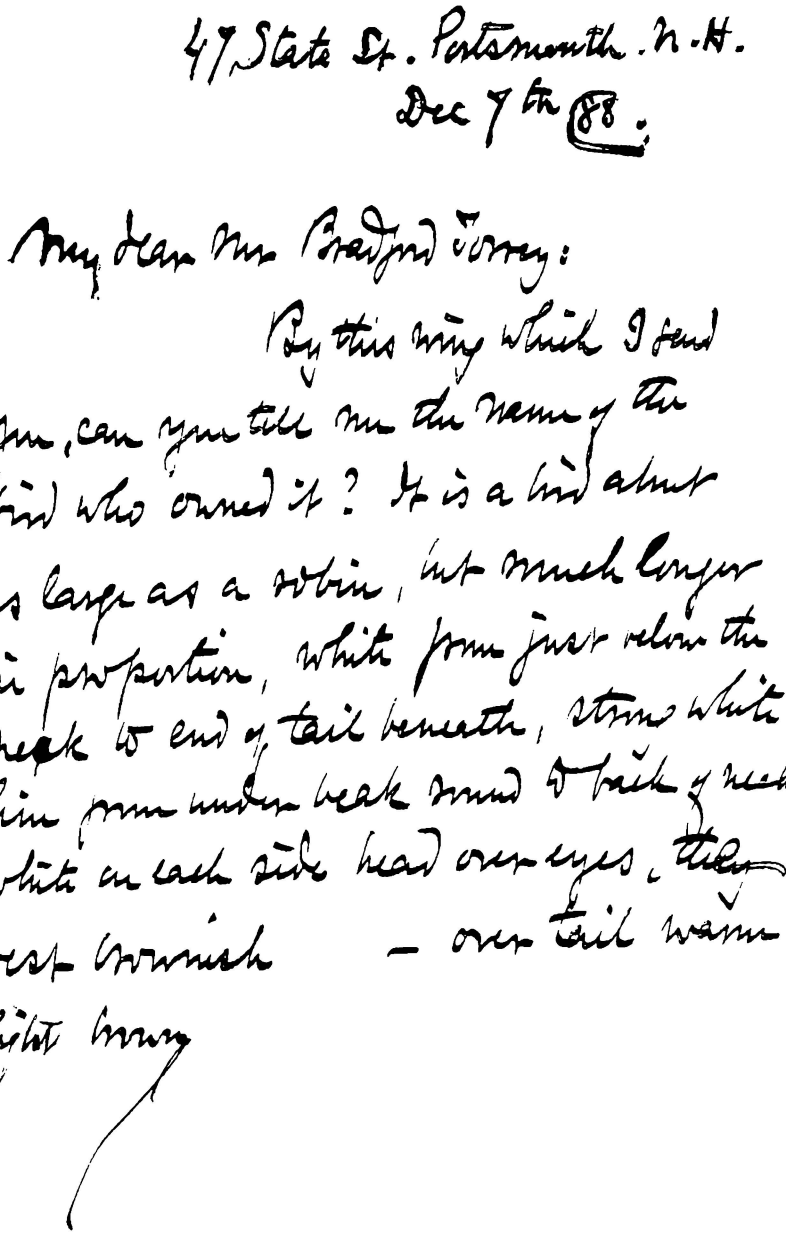
By This Wing - Celia Thaxter

By This Wing

Letters by Celia Thaxter to Bradford Torrey about birds at the Isles of Shoals 1888 to 1894

Edited by
DONNA MARION TITUS

By This Wing


47 State St. Portsmouth. N.H.
Dec 7th 88.

My dear Mr Bradford Torrey:

By this wing which I send you, can you tell me the name of the bird who owned it? It is a bird about as large as a robin, but much longer in proportion, white from just below the neck to end of tail beneath, stone white line from under beak round back of neck, white on each side head over eyes, the rest brownish — over tail warm light brown

Detail: Celia Thaxter's letter to Bradford Torrey, December 7, 1888. Courtesy of the Star Island Corporation.

By This Wing

Letters by Celia Thaxter to Bradford Torrey about birds at the Isles of Shoals 1888 to 1894

Edited by
DONNA MARION TITUS

J. Palmer Publisher
Manchester, New Hampshire

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Bradford Torrey's letter to Sarah Orne Jewettt reproduced courtesy of the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Cover: ***Kildeer on Appledore*** *1998*
oil on canvas, 16" x 20"
Back Cover: ***Rocks & Gulls*** *1998*
oil on canvas, 16" x 20"
Paintings by Donna Marion Titus.
Photographs of paintings by Ron Titus.

Dedicated to my mother

who taught me about birds and wildflowers

and life.

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to Donna Marion Titus. . *DMT*

Celia Thaxter Letters Edited
By Her Friends A. F. and R. L.
(Annie Fields & Rose Lamb)
Boston, Mass. Houghton Mifflin 1895 . *AF*

Star Island Corporation,
Jessie Donahue Collection,
MS 28-71, Vaughn Cottage.
Stored at the Portsmouth Athenaeum
9 Market Square
Portsmouth, NH 03801 . *Star*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks go to the Board of the Star Island Corporation and past president, Richard Howe, for permission to publish the letters from their collection which are used in this book. My thanks also to Joy Thurlow for her assistance as museum curator of Vaughn Cottage, Star Island, and to Fred McGill, Island Historian, for his friendship, unfailing kindness, encouragement, and for all the Shoals lore and legend that he has passed on to me. I am grateful to Adelma Lajoie of Concord, New Hampshire, who recognized the value of Thaxter's letters and hoped to preserve them in some way by sending me copies.

In New Hampshire the staff at the Manchester Public Library was always very helpful, especially so was Norman Foyse in the New Hampshire History department. Michael Huxtable at the Portsmouth Public Library, and Marcia Jebb, at the Portsmouth Athenaeum assisted me greatly

At the Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, I was able to see Celia Thaxter's own tiny shell necklace and discovered a letter from Bradford Torrey to Sarah Orne Jewett, which mentions Celia Thaxter, thus giving us a look at his handwriting and a sense of him as a real person instead of as just a mind entirely, as Celia once put it. Betty Falsey, librarian, and Leslie A. Morris, Curator of Manuscripts, were a pleasure to work with there.

Malcolm Ferguson, my friend and fellow Shoaler, deserves special credit for the research done and sent to me over the years and for the knowledge he so generously shared.

Individuals who contributed information or support in various ways were Peter Randall, Jonathan Hubbard, Sharon Stephan, Stephanie Voss Nugent, Albert Doolittle, Peter Lamb,Ed Rutledge, Dorothy and Robert Tuttle, and many friends who are members of the Isles of Shoals Historical and Research Association (ISHRA).

Working with the printer, Tom Hogan, of Bedford Printing, Inc., in Bedford, New Hampshire, and his Graphic Designer, Bob Gehling, has been an education in itself. Their patience, courtesy, and good humor brought us through the creation of this book, step by step.

Bonnie and Gil Hart, and Marise Fraser spent hours reading the manuscript and checking for errors. For keen eyes and good critical judgement I thank them.

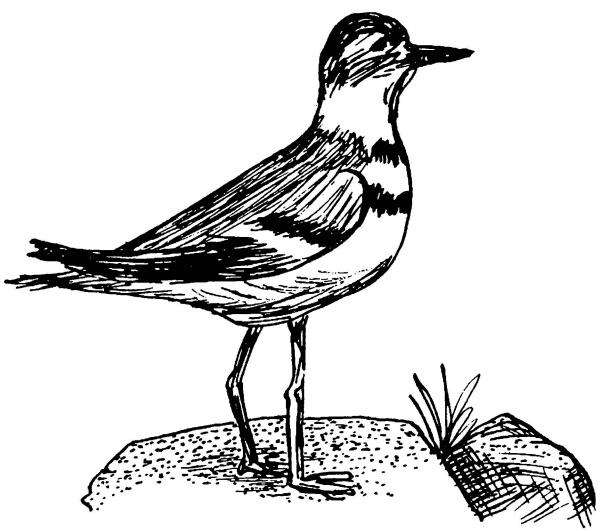
Frieda Marion, editor and publisher, guided me every step of the way, and I am most appreciative of her wisdom, common sense, and good advice.

Essential to the operation was my husband, Ron Titus, who put in nearly as many hours as I did on the project and was my steadfast and loyal partner in this endeavor.

CHAPTER ONE

By this wing...can you tell me?

1888



BY THIS PEN

Celia's life

Celia Laighton Thaxter was born in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on June 29, 1835. She was four when her father, Thomas Laighton, became a lighthouse keeper on White Island at the Isles of Shoals, six to ten miles off the coast in the Atlantic Ocean. She and her father and mother, Eliza Rymes Laighton, and baby brother, Oscar, went out to White Island in 1839. A year later another baby brother, Cedric, was born. The Laighton children grew up on White Island and also the family spent some time on neighboring Smuttynose Island running a small boardinghouse there. Her happy island childhood would leave an indelible impression on Celia. When she was twelve they moved permanently to Appledore, the largest of the nine islands that make up the Isles of Shoals. Thomas Laighton built a big hotel, "Appledore House," which his sons would eventually run after he died.

Celia was a bright girl who had a warm outgoing personality, good health, much energy, and many talents. With little formal education, as a young adult she started writing and publishing poems and stories. At sixteen she had married Levi Thaxter; they had three sons. What seemed like a good catch and a good match at the time (Levi, aged 27, was a Harvard graduate from a well-to-do family) became later a troubled and difficult marriage. Contributing factors were the mental and physical disabilities of their oldest son, Karl, and Levi's inability to find steady employment. In spite of these problems, Celia became a popular success, widely read and well known for her poetry and her two prose books, *Among the Isles of Shoals* (1873) and *An Island Garden* (1894). When the boys were grown, she was able to leave her mainland home in Newtonville, Massachusetts, and return to Appledore. There she became the center of an informal "salon" in the parlor in her cottage, encouraging creativity in others as well as in herself.

She had inherited her mother's green thumb and over the years became an enthusiastic gardener. Her flower garden on Appledore was a source of delight and admiration for all. With an eye for exquisite detail and beauty she also began china painting, decorating hundreds of cups and saucers, bowls and pitchers for sale. She was an extraordinary woman who led a unique, complicated, and intensely passionate life. Her death from heart trouble at the young age of fifty-nine in 1894 was truly the end of an era at the Isles of Shoals.*

My connection

My connection to the Shoals started when I was 16. I attended youth conferences on Star Island and, like many others, kept returning. Eventually I became familiar with other Shoals islands. For six summers I worked on Star (1986-1991), was a Smuttynose Ranger for a number of years, spent a month on White as an Artist-In-Residence and spent time on Appledore. Constantly throughout the years, I have painted out there on location.

While I grew up reading and loving poetry, I didn't really "discover" Celia Thaxter until I was older. As time has passed, I've come to admire and deeply appreciate her writing, but it was really her life that first interested me because, as an artist, a wife and mother myself, I understood the struggle to do both housework and artwork. Now we call this the Balancing Act. In the 19th century there was no name for it, but it was a situation Celia Thaxter and other creative women dealt with every day. In 1979 I began a dramatic impersonation program about Celia Laighton Thaxter, poet, writer and artist from the Isles of Shoals. Calling my program *Celia Thaxter: the Poet & the Woman,* I had a costume made, wrote my own publicity, and began speaking at local clubs, libraries, churches, historical societies, and schools. The program took on a life of its own and is still going strong.

* For sources on biographical material, see Bibliography, p. 95 and 96.

The year before I embarked upon this adventure, I set myself the task of reading all the books I could find by or about Thaxter and the history of the islands. Many more books have been written since then, and I find I am constantly reading them or re-reading the old ones. At the time, however, a year of study seemed sufficient for me to begin. What I didn't realize is how much more I would learn from other people along the way.

After one of my programs I received a note from a Mrs. Adelma Lajoie of Concord, New Hampshire, who had been in the audience. With the note came a package of typed copies of letters written by Celia Thaxter. Mrs. Lajoie wrote that she had typed the copies in a hurry before sending them back. Back to whom? I wondered. Then, in answer to my thank-you and query about her source, came a second note from her, dated October 31, 1983, saying, "The copies of the letters written by Celia Thaxter that I sent you were sent to me by Rosamond Thaxter about 15 years ago. I met her one day going over to Star Island to look for birds. She was on her way over to her house on Smuttynose. I told her how much I enjoyed her book, *Sandpiper,** and she talked a lot about Celia. She said she had some copies of letters by Celia that were not included in her book, but if I would like to read them she would send them to me and I could copy them if I would like to..."

Of course, I read the letters with delight and felt they were unmistakably the authentic voice of Celia Thaxter. I retyped them and put them away in a notebook where they have been for the many years since then. In light of continuing interest in this island writer and the more scholarly research now being done on her life, I think it is time to put this collection of letters into print.

Celia's letters

Celia Laighton Thaxter was a widow in her early fifties when, in 1888, she wrapped a broken bird's wing in a package and wrote that first letter to Bradford Torrey (he was forty-five) beginning with the dramatic and compelling question, "By this wing which I send you,

* *Sandpiper: The Life of Celia Thaxter,* biography by Rosamond Thaxter of her grandmother, Celia Thaxter.

can you tell me the name of the bird who owned it?" She had heard of him as an authority on birds, had read at least one of his many magazine articles, and perhaps read his first book, *Birds in the Bush*, published in 1885.

Bradford Torrey (1843-1912) was educated in his native town, Weymouth, Massachusetts, and had a number of occupations before discovering that he could earn a living by combining his love of nature with his writing ability. He was on the editorial staff of a popular children's magazine, *Youth's Companion*, to which Celia Thaxter also contributed stories and poems. In spite of Torrey's lack of academic ornithological training, he became widely known in his field through his accurate observations of American birds. Other books written by him during Celia's lifetime were *A Rambler's Lease,* 1889, (cover design by Sarah Wyman Whitman who would also design the cover for Thaxter's *An Island Garden,* 1894), *The Footpath Way,* 1892, and *A Florida Sketch Book,* which Celia was encouraging him to write in her letter of November 12, 1893, and which was published at the end of September 1894, about a month after her death.*

Celia's interest in birds began early in her childhood, for the Isles of Shoals is on a migratory path and a wide variety of North American birds flying over in the spring and fall stop over there. In *Among the Isles of Shoals,* 1873, Celia gives a vivid description of Laighton family life on White Island, where every wildflower that bloomed and every bird or butterfly that passed through was noticed and appreciated. Thomas and Eliza Laighton were loving parents who taught and encouraged their children in every way they could.

* He would go on to write *Spring Notes From Tennessee,* 1896; *A World of Green Hills,* 1898; *Everyday Birds,* 1901; *Footing it in Franconia,* 1901; *The Clerk of the Woods,* 1903; *Nature's Invitation,* 1904; *Friends on the Shelf,* 1906; and *Field Days in California,* 1913. He also edited fourteen of the twenty published volumes of the journals of Thoreau, 1906. Primarily an essayist, Torrey's style is informal, confiding, flowing, and conversational, his writing voice similar to that of other 19th century writers' including Thaxter.

Day by day the dramatic surroundings of this small rugged New England island made an enormous impression on the little girl and her younger brothers. How could it not? There were not many toys, but there were grasshoppers, spiders, shells, crabs, seaweed, great rocks and deep chasms, the wide sky overhead, clouds, rainbows, sunrises, sunsets, the enormous ocean and the constant rise and fall of the tide.

Celia responded to it all, emotionally as well as intellectually. "To the heart of Nature one must needs be drawn in such a life; and very soon I learned how richly she repays in deep refreshment the reverent love of her worshipper." she wrote.* All Celia Thaxter's writing, poetry and prose, is filled with references to birds and flowers, the ever-changing sea and the rocky island terrain. Her water colors and china painting also reflect these themes.

Even before her correspondence with Torrey began in December of 1888, Celia had become involved in the social action cause to protect birds from wholesale slaughter. Birds were being killed by the thousands to be stuffed and used on women's hats. We know Celia was a member of one local Audubon Society from the certificate of membership (see illustration, p.13) on which she signed as local secretary, Feb. 11th, 1886, Waltham, Massachusetts.

The following year she wrote an article for the first issue of the *Audubon Magazine*, February, 1887. Titled "Woman's Heartlessness" (by Mrs. Celia Thaxter), it expressed her genuine outrage in no uncertain terms. "Ah me, my fire-flecked oriole...Your beauty makes you but a target for the accursed gun that shatters your lovely life, quenches your delicious voice, destroys your love, your bliss, your dutiful cares, your whole beautiful being, that your dead body may disfigure some woman's head and call all eyes to gaze upon her!..." (The article itself is dated Boston, Mass., Dec. 26, 1886.) A facsimile of this Vol. 1, no. 1, *Audubon Magazine* in which Celia's article appeared was reprinted as an anniversary supplement in the March 1987 issue of the magazine *Audubon*.

* ***Among the Isles of Shoals,*** p.123.

Celia continued to voice her opinion about these "senseless murders" in her letters to Bradford Torrey and others, prophesying sadly in the January 5, 1890, letter: "By and by there will be no more birds at all." In fact, during the 19th century, the common tern and the herring gull were nearly wiped out along the eastern seacoast.* Celia was a woman ahead of her time. Her warning sounds very modern and could still be heeded today when Americans are at least generally more aware of endangered species and other conservation issues.

We don't have Torrey's letters in reply, but Celia's letters alone tell the story, and here we find a sympathetic and lively dialogue based on common interests. Celia, as always, is direct and informal. As you read the letters you can feel their friendship develop, and it's strange to think that they never met. Torrey moved on to California. He never married. Celia died on August 26, 1894, on her beloved Appledore Island, but her letters live on, an interesting series because they are all written *by* the same person *to* the same person.

While the amount of writing in these letters may seem overwhelming to those of us who are used to telephone messages and e-mail, long letter writing was a common form of communication in the 19th century. Then, too, this correspondence covered a time span of nearly six and a half years. We should also remember that while Celia was writing to her "dear Mr. Torrey," she was also writing letters to others as well, to Annie Fields, Sarah Jewett, Rose Lamb, Ellen Robbins, John Greenleaf Whittier until his death in 1892, to her younger sons, John and Roland and their families, (Karl usually lived with her) and to a host of other friends and acquaintances, not to mention business letters to editors of magazines and publishers of her books. To put it simply, Celia Thaxter was a writer, and good letters were probably just a normal part of her everyday work.

* See Borror & Holmes: - *Breeding Birds of the Isles of Shoals.*

Editorial method and sources

Twelve of the letters in this book are the ones sent to me by Adelma Lajoie. In these letters I made only minor corrections in punctuation, making no basic changes in the text at all. Nothing has been left out. An additional nine are from *Letters of Celia Thaxter,* edited by Annie Fields & Rose Lamb, Houghton Mifflin, 1895, long out of print. I suspect Fields and Lamb omitted some parts of the original letters. I know they did so in the letter of January 28, 1890, the one letter I transcribed from the original. Inserted chronologically, these letters are presented in a slightly different form, without salutation or closing, as they were originally presented in the book. Twenty-four are from the Jessie E. Donahue collection in the Star Island Corporation. These are also inserted chronologically to complete the series, making forty-four letters in all. Nothing has been deleted, all the letters are complete as I found them in manuscript form.

An abbreviation, *DMT, AF,* or *Star,* will be found at the end of each letter in the text. The source of letters code is on page xi.

In the footnotes identifying authors, I listed only some books that had been written by the 1880's or '90's when Celia was writing these letters and that she might have read at that time. Later those authors may, in fact, have written books that are more well known.

My hope is that this book, *By This Wing*, will be enjoyed by birders, island historians, old and new Shoalers, and friends of Celia alike, and that it will add to the growing knowledge and appreciation of Celia Thaxter which follows her into the 21st century.

Donna Marion Titus

47 State Street,
Portsmouth[1]
Dec. 7th, 1888

My dear Mr. Bradford Torrey:

By this wing which I send you, can you tell me the name of the bird who owned it? It is a bird about as large as a robin, but longer in proportion, white from just below the neck to end of tail beneath, strong white line from under beak round to back of neck, white on each side head over eyes, the vest brownish - over tail warm light brown.

The effect of plumage round neck is a broad black ring under white throat, then a white one then a grayish and the white breast plumage unbroken to end of tail. The reason I ask is because in the late tremendous tempest, myriads of these birds settled on the Isles of Shoals, filling the air with a harsh, shrill, incessant cry, and not to be driven away by guns or any of man's inhospitable treatment. Their number was so great as to be amazing, and they had never been seen by any of the present inhabitants of the Shoals before. Can you tell me the name of this bird? Doubtless you can. It is some kind of plover, I should judge, but do not know. I shall be very grateful if you will give me any information on the subject.

I read your November article in the Atlantic with the greatest pleasure and there were three flowers blooming with us at the time not on your list. One was the pimpernel, and I have forgotten the others. The houstonia, or eyebright, I think you mentioned. It blossoms with us till frost.

I am sorry to say women are still going about like squaws with their heads full of feathers, the Audubon Soc.[2] to the contrary notwithstanding. Vanity being so much stronger than pity or charity or anything else in the feminine breast. Alas!

Hoping to have a word from you soon, believe me

Very sincerely yours
Celia Thaxter

DMT

After her mother died in 1877, Celia no longer needed to spend her winters on Appledore, but wintered in Boston or in Portsmouth instead. Rosamond Thaxter: *Sandpiper.*

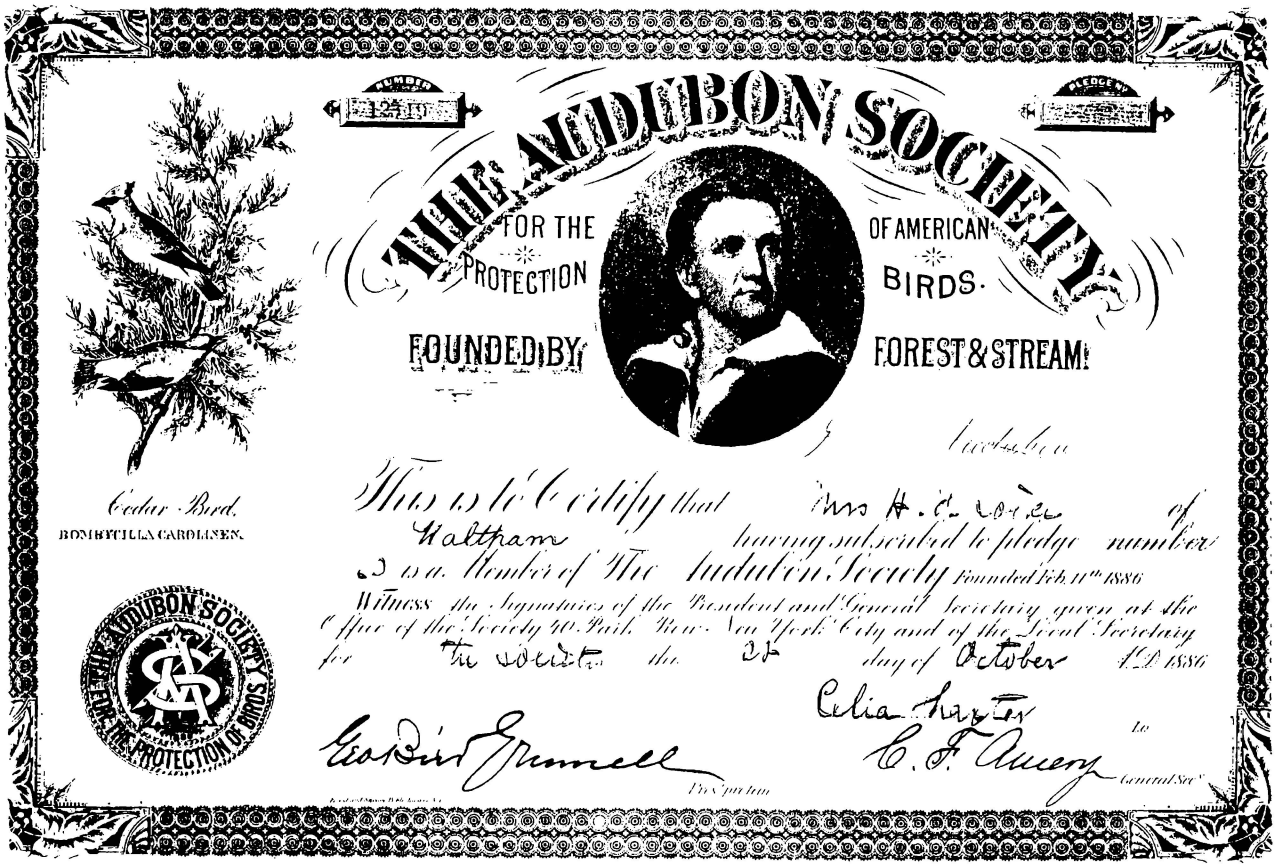
For Thaxter's active concern see page.7 and 8.

Portsmouth, N.H.
47 State St.
Dec. 16, 1888

My dear Mr. Torrey:

Both your notes have reached me and I thank you for the information about the bird. Why is it called Kildeer plover, do you know?

I was not at the Shoals when they appeared, for I came to the continent only in November and am here for the winter. I shall be delighted if I can tell you or Dr. Chadbourne anything of interest about the birds and all I know about them my brother[1] tells me. It seems they appeared in large numbers, hundreds of them, in the midst of the great storm of November 25th, feeding in the little valleys where the sea swept across the islands. All sorts of strange things were busy devouring everything they could find, always sunning, chasing each other, very quarrelsome, fighting all the time. They were in poor conditions, so lean that the men did not shoot them after the first day, a fact which gives your correspondent great satisfaction! They were very tame, would settle back



Courtesy of the Star Island Corporation.

immediately after being disturbed. Their cry was very annoying, piercing and exasperating, especially as they kept it up all night. My brother said they would allow you to come within twenty feet of them without moving. No one had ever seen them before, and the most important fact I have to communicate about them is that they are still there.

My brother came from the Shoals yesterday and says the place is alive with them, all the islands (7 of them).[2] You have never been at the Shoals? If not I must send you my Shoals Book,[3] if you have not seen it. The place is so unique and peculiar, perhaps you will care to know about it.

If there is anything more, any question I could answer about the unwanted visitation of the kildeer plover I shall be most happy. I wish I had been at the Islands myself, for it would have been very interesting to watch them.

Believe me very cordially yours,

DMT

Celia Thaxter

My brother: Oscar Laighton (1839-1939), who with younger brother Cedric Laighton (1840-1899), was a proprietor of Appledore House, the hotel on Appledore Island, founded by their father, Thomas, in 1848. Thomas died in 1866, after which the Laighton Brothers took over the running of the hotel.

island (7 of them): There are 9 islands at high tide, 7 at low tide; Appledore, Duck, Malaga, Smuttynose, and Cedar are in the state of Maine. Star, Lunging, White, and Seavey are in New Hampshire.

my Shoals Book: *Among the Isles of Shoals,* Celia Thaxter. Boston, Mass. James R. Osgood & Co., 1873.

47 State Street,
Portsmouth, N.H.
Dec. 22nd, '88

My dear Mr. Torrey:

I send the small volume with this.

My brother returns from the Shoals today, and reports that the Kildeer have gradually left, a few at a time, till today, before he came away he saw but two on Appledore, the largest island, and one on Star Island, there may have been more, but he was not searching for them and only noticed these. That they should have remained so long is something remarkable, isn't it?

The White Owls are very interesting at the Shoals this winter. My brother saw twenty at once one winter. Last winter is the first time they were not seen at all there, since we lived there. One single English sparrow has spent several years there, feeding in winter with the fowls about the door. Song sparrows remain occasionally all winter there. They are always as tame as chickens, you can't drive them away, as I sometimes try to do in the spring when they devour my sweet peas as soon as they begin to sprout!

Last May a cloud of thrushes, sparrows, etc., descended on the gardens and dug up and devoured every single seed we had planted. Such wholesale devastation I have never seen, tho' we had all the beds protected by netting, the little creatures were so greedy they strangled themselves in the meshes of the net trying to get in and out. I found several dead, choked to death!

I hope I shall have the pleasure of seeing you sometime, to have a good "bird talk"!

Believe me yours very sincerely
DMT C. Thaxter

47 State Street,
Portsmouth, N.H.
Dec. 31st, '88

My dear Mr. Torrey:

My brother comes in from the Shoals again today and reports the Kildeer plover still there, a few on each island, and crying all night. He says they may be heard at every hour in the night, and they say "Killdee", not Kildeer. He says also, there are robins and blackbirds there, song sparrows, lots of what we call gray blue bunting, and green and yellow birds that feed on seeds of murdock, etc. I thought you'd like to hear about the plover, so send this word.

Yours very truly
C. Thaxter

DMT

CHAPTER TWO

I have a passion for birds

1889

47 State Street,
Portsmouth, N.H.
Jan. 7th '89

My dear Mr. Torrey:

Thank you for your note, and I'm glad you found anything in the book worth reading and hope sincerely to see you at the Shoals some time! It is a very easy journey of about three hours from Boston, and there are three or four boats daily to and fro in the summer. My brother came from there yesterday and reports the kildeer still there, but the black birds he did not see. I questioned him about them, he says they were small and silent. He heard no notes from them. The birds I called buntings, wrongly I am sure, are small, about the size of sparrows, but more delicately shaped, perhaps about as large as the chip sparrow, and bluish slate color on the back, a black cap on the head and a black tail, breast ashen gray, light, almost white. They must be very common, for their name is legion in the autumn at the Shoals. They are there now, any quantity of them. Robins still there.

Last winter there were flocks of birds not quite so large as robins, remaining there all winter. They had beautiful rosy heads and necks, almost as richly colored as the purple finch. I saw them when I went there in March, a flock of thirty or more alighted on a roof, making a lovely splash of color. They went away before summer. A man on one of the adjacent islands caught one at dusk one night, its seemed to be benumbed with cold and crept under the edge of a rock. He caught it, brought it into the house and put it into a cage where it stayed all winter singing beautifully. He fed it with seeds. In the spring he hung the cage outside, the door and the bottom fell out and the bird flew away. I was glad, but he bewailed his fate!

If I hear any more bird items I shall tell you. Are not you surprised that the Kildeer are still there? I think the blue-gray bird must be the snow bird. Snow buntings of course are always seen there in the winter.

Yours very sincerely
Celia Thaxter

DMT

47 State Street,
Portsmouth, N.H.
Feb. 19th '89

My dear Mr. Torrey:

No objection in the world, of course! I hope you will write the article, for all you write is so interesting.

The Kildeer are still at the Shoals! Now isn't that remarkable? I suppose they could not find their way back, poor things!

Robins and sparrows are there, also. I am going out there myself next month, perhaps I shall see and hear the Kildeer; I wish I might! I was about to answer your last note when this came. I shall be so glad to see Chadburne's paper on the subject, which you are so kind as to say you will send me.

When I get to the Shoals I will report to you what birds I find. If this phenomenally warm weather continues, I fancy the birds and the spring will come with a rush together!

Ever yours sincerely
C. Thaxter

DMT

Appledore, Isles of Shoals
off Portsmouth
May 21, 1889

To Bradford Torrey:

I did not forget that I promised to write about the birds when I reached this place, but I have been so confounded at my own ignorance that I really haven't had a word to say! The kildeer stayed till about March 1st; but we did not get here till April, so I missed seeing them. There are so many birds that visit us, not to stay, for there are no trees in which to build, and I know so few by name!

The commonest birds, - song sparrows, blackbirds, robins, sand-pipers, loons, gulls, etc., all the swallows, barn, chimney, and the sapphire blue and white breasted martins, the nuthatch, kingfisher, kingbird, etc.,-- all these I know, but there are so many more! I wish you were here to tell me of them. My brother Cedric told me he saw a red and black "flycatcher" yesterday; now I wonder just what that was!

Mr. Brewster[1] was here in the middle of July one year when a pair of vireos came and spent the day in the vine over my piazza; it was so pleasant to have them recognized, for I, alas! knew them not, welcome though they were.

I do hope you'll find your way here this summer, if only to take a peep at our wild rock. I should be delighted to welcome you, I assure you, more than the vireos, and that's saying a good deal; for I have a passion for birds and adore them though I am so ignorant of them. But the sweet house-keeping of the martins in the little boxes on my piazza roof is more enchanting to me than the most fascinating opera, and I worship music! I think I must have begun a conscious existence as some kind of a bird in aeons past, I love them so! Do come and let us have a talk about them by and by.

AF

Probably William Brewster (1851-1919) ornithologist; curator Department of Birds, Cambridge Museum; author of *Descriptions of The First Plumage in Various North American Birds* (1878-79), *Bird Migration* (1886).

Shoals, May 27th '89

My dear Mr. Torrey:

Certainly, - my brother will swear to the Kildeer and the man who shot the one whose wings I sent you. He shot a dozen. They remained till the very last week in February, growing fewer and fewer and finally disappearing altogether. It was my brother Oscar who saw them, he lives here throughout the winter he was exasperated with their crying, he called it aggravating and insisted that they kept him awake nights, never ceasing their wearing note.

Cedric, my other brother says if the red and black Fly Catcher must have a white belly to be a redstart, then the bird he saw was not a redstart for it was black and red - not a tanager either, for that he knows by sight. The red and black visitor was here several days - I wish they had told me. Oscar saw him too. There's a deep green place where a little white-blooming medlar tree grows and a balm of Gilead and tall wild roses and ferns and alder, etc. There the land birds will linger for a few days. It is very pleasant, this way they have of visiting us for a few days, only we miss them so when they go! A bobolink spent all last week with us and we really were reluctant to come in to our meals and leave him singing! And when a ferruginous thrush came to see us last year, all the inhabitants of the island used to go out and turn their faces to the sky and listen when he began his heavenly pipe! I am writing this at five in the morning and the white throated sparrow is whistling so sweet! I really think they must build here they are always heard, "whistlers" everyone calls them here. I am always up at four and I hear everything any bird has to say on any subject whatever. How interesting all you tell me about Mr. Maynard and the bittern!

There are two or three people who will swear to the Kildeer. I write hastily for an infrequent boat going shoreward this morning. Next month the daily steamer begins and we have, and can send,

mails three times a day, till then we depend on the little tug, Pinafore,[1] which only goes shoreward for supplies and errands once or twice a week.

Ever truly,
DMT C. Thaxter

Pinafore: a 45 foot steamer, named for the popular Gilbert & Sullivan operetta. A good little working boat for Appledore, she was able to make the run to Portsmouth market in the fall, winter, and spring, when the regular boat was not running. The Laighton brothers owned her for twenty years until she was lost in a storm.
Oscar Laighton *Ninety Years at the Isles of Shoals*

Shoals, June 10th '89

My dear Mr. Torrey:

We will swear to our kildeers, so you are safe. Edward Caswell[1] who shot the dozen (the wing of one of which I sent you) swears they were here till nearly March, the number growing smaller till reduced to two or three, my brother says "in February I saw them," but Mr. Caswell was here all the time and his testimony is to be relied on.

A pair of cuckoos have been here for a fortnight. The natives say if they are not shot it will never clear off!

Ever yours truly!
DMT C. Thaxter

Edward Caswell: from Rye, NH. Since the 1860s he had worked on Appledore for the Laighton family. McGill: *Letters to Celia.*

Shoals, Nov. 10th '89

Dear Mr. Torrey:

A few notes about the birds at the Shoals. My brother has shot 3 white owls within the last few days, much to my distress! Perfectly beautiful they were, their plumage so exquisitely white and soft and clean. He sent two of them to a taxidermist to be set up, and then they sell at large prices.

My brother Cedric told me that years ago he counted twenty-five within sight at once here, one autumn, and shot seven of them! I think it means an early winter, and cold, when they appear so early. They are better than many cats for destroying the rats that so congregate in the most surprising way on these rocks. Even the loneliest, outlying rocks are infested with rats, that live on shellfish, etc. And as for this big, rambling house, we have one continual war, with cats and poison and traps and every weapon and device to keep them down, about it. It really comes to be a question which shall survive, rats or human beings!

In the autumn, when the birds should be away, we import an army of cats, but I dread them, for the birds stay till winter is fairly here, scattering flocks and companies, and there is continual massacre and flying of feathers. Woe is me!

A blue bird came and stayed here all alone for more than a week in the last of October, and we watched him day after day and wondered what he could be thinking of, to stay here all alone. His sweet cry attracted us first and then we saw him continually alighting on the tennis wires and all about the gardens, perfectly tame he seemed to be. A crow-black bird all alone too came and stayed a fortnight and over, into November, scratching like a hen about the manure heap on the tennis ground. Grackle, do you call him? His neck was green and purple in the sunshine, and he looked like a little crow. He was so tame you could hardly scare him up.

The song sparrows are like little dogs and cats, so tame, one hopped along beside me on the path a long way as I was walking the other day, and finally crossed the road just before my feet, quite at his leisure, as if he knew I wouldn't hurry him!

Did I tell you the pair of cuckoos stayed here all Summer long, till late in the season, into September?

Yesterday we found a cat had devoured a large bird, large as a thrush. I didn't see him but they told me about it and I found the feathers, dark blue-gray, and olive at the tips. I startled a big brown owl out from under the eaves of the piazza last week, he flew away and I did not see him again. Hawks there have been lots, kingfishers always haunt the coves, curlew every now and then I hear. Snow birds and flocks of little creatures appear and disappear, I hear and see them, they go and come, but I don't know half of them. Nuthatches creep up and down the roofs and peer at the edges of the shingles, the most enchanting little wrens have haunted the garden this fall. A pleasant day comes and the island is alive with wings, and when it is cold they are gone. We have had many more crows than usual this autumn. Coots and loons and ducks, etc. My brother shoots whenever he can, of course!

All summer we hardly see a gull, and now the water is white with them!

Ever yrs. truly
C. Thaxter

I had just finished my note when the infrequent mail arrived bringing your kind note and the book, which I am delighted to have. Thank you so much for sending it to me. Indeed I shall read it, all those chapters in which I have already taken pleasure, and the many which are quite new to me. I think we all owe you a debt of gratitude for letting us see with your eyes and hear with your ears as you take us straying through this autumn. An old woman said to

me once, "I have just been reading your book. How you must enjoy your mind!" I am sure I enjoy yours, and I love to read all you have to say.

Ever yours truly
C. Thaxter

Haven't you a spare photo of yourself? It is a curious feeling to write to "a mind" entirely, in this impersonal way! Please send your shadow to me and I will send you my flowerbank and myself, a grandmother of fifty-four, and your sincere friend.

C. Thaxter

Every one of these flowers and plants I tend and weed and water myself, no one else touches them. I adore them all! Don't they look as if I did? They are wonders of bloom. I wish you could see the colors of this flower bank! Words cannot paint it.

DMT

47 State Street
Portsmouth, N.H.
13th Dec. 1889

My Dear Mr. Torrey:

I have read your beautiful book, every single word of it, with the greatest possible pleasure, and I feel like shaking hands with you with both hands. Not only have I read it once, but I take it up again and again for pure pleasure. I can't begin to tell you how I sympathize with your moods, with your philosophy, with all you say.

"Esoteric Peripatecticism" is the most delightful of all, I think. I do so heartily agree with you! "Some of the very best things of this life, things unseen and therefore eternal, are never to be come at industriously."

"Behind the Eye" is another favorite of mine. Did you ever watch the fading out of a life, have you noticed when people go out of this world, they pass from behind their eyes precisely as when a face looks from a window and then leaves it, there is a the window but the person is gone. Not extinguished, never! but simply passed away from behind the windows from which all their lives they have looked.

I wish I could see you. I want to ask you lots of questions. The flowers you speak of, many I must know by other names. Knawel, for instance, what is it like? Do tell me. The story of the voices, anything more exquisite I never read. I want to talk to you about every chapter of your book. I send you three volumes of verse, good, bad, and indifferent, and if some time you dip into them perhaps you will see why I am so delighted with your work. In "Driftweed" there is a poem called "Daybreak"[1] the last verse of which says almost exactly what you say in some of these essays.

You will see I have written for almost all the birds I know, a poem for each. Yellow Bird, Robin, Sandpiper, Songsparrow, Great White Owl, Burgomaster Gull, Medrake and Osprey, Swallow, etc. Inhospitality, Birds' Orchestra, Perseverance, etc. etc. all deal with the same subject and there are many for children not included in these vols., Great Blue Heron, The Shag, Gold Robin, etc. etc. I hope you won't be appalled with such an ocean of poetry at once! I could not help sending it. Have you seen a poem about the pink Gerardia by John Albee?[2] It is worthy the flower.

Believe me, cordially yours,
DMT Celia Thaxter

the last verse of "Daybreak":
"...I turn my face in worship to the glory of the East.
I thank the lavish giver of my life's perpetual feast,
And fain would I be worthy to partake of Nature's bliss,
And share with her a moment so exquiste as this!"

John Albee (1833-1915) New Castle, N.H. Author of *Confessions of Boyhood, Literary Art*, (1881) and *New Castle,Historic and Picturesque,* (1884).

47 State Street
Portsmouth
December 20, 1889

To Bradford Torrey:

Don't think it arrogance when I say I think I have a deeper enjoyment and understanding of your book than most people: it is only because I have lived so much of my life quite alone with nature. It seems as if a spring of joyful recognition leapt within me, as you were of my kin. People do go through life so blindly, so dark and deaf to this beautiful world you know so well, so dead to the keen and exquisite enjoyment Nature offers to all who will take it.

I was pleased to come across one of your quotations about "blunting the fine point of seldom pleasure" from the Shakespeare sonnet.[1] I know and love well those matchless sonnets! I think, if all the books in the world had to go, I should snatch this little volume in preference to anything else, to live with gratefully the rest of my life. How few people know or care about them. But what exhaustless wealth, what wisdom, what splendor, what utter perfection of expression! The force of language can no further go.

Your note with the knawel[2] just comes. Thank you much. Now I don't know it. It is very like a little rose-purple, star-shaped flower which carpets the ground in places at the Shoals: I mean the leaves are like. I wonder if you know what I mean? Color and shape are exquisite but the blossoms very tiny.

AF

Shakespeare's sonnet #52:

"So am I as the rich, whose blessed key
Can bring him to his sweet up-locked treasure,
The which he will not every hour survey,
For blunting the fine point of seldom pleasure.
Therefore, are feasts so solemn and so rare
Since, seldom coming, in the long year set,
Like stones of worth they thinly placed are,
Or captain jewels in the carcanet.
So is the time that keeps you as my chest,
Or as the wardrobe which the robe doth hide,
To make some special instant special blest,
By new unfolding his imprisoned pride.
Blessed are you, whose worthiness gives scope,
Being had - to triumph, being lacked - to hope."

Knawel: (Scleranthus annuus.) Low spreading plant with tiny green flowers at the ends of the branches...the upper leaves are opposite. The cup-shaped calyx has 5 greenlobes with narrow white margins.....leaves very narrow, pointed...Pink Family. *Wildflower Guide*. Lawrence Newcomb. Little Brown, 1977.

47 State Street,
Portsmouth
December 27, 1889

To Bradford Torrey:

Thank you for the second beautiful book which came on Christmas Day. I am reading it very slowly, because I enjoy it so much, and go back and read over again, and am miserly about the pleasure of it, and make it last as long as I can, and after it is all done what a lovely mood it leaves one in! There are few books, in these latter days at least, that I wish to take up again and again for the refreshment they bring; it is the finest kind of a compliment that can be paid to a writer, this of real love for his work, a wish to make a companion of it, and to keep it always at hand for the pure enjoyment of it.

I heard the hermit thrushes in South Berwick woods. Sarah Jewett[1] drove me down into the woods just after sunset and we sat in the carriage and listened. I had never heard them before. What an experience it was I leave you to guess. What you say about them is most interesting, and how true it is that a single movement of Beethoven's is better than a whole world of Liszt's transcriptions! I don't know the brown thrush's song, at least as such. Doesn't Burroughs[2] say somewhere that the jay has a delicious love song? Do you know it? I have not yet come to it, perhaps.

AF

Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1901) South Berwick, Maine. Writer and friend of Celia. *Deephaven* (1877), *Country By-Ways*, (1881), *A Marsh Island* (1885), *A White Heron and other Stories* (1886).

John Burroughs (1837-1921) American nature writer. Author of many essays and poems. *Wake Robin* (1871).

47 State Street
Portsmouth
January 5, 1890

To Bradford Torrey:

I was delighted when you classed the song sparrow among the immortals! Do you know, I have noticed them too, crouching to protect their legs from the biting wind while they fed. Tell me, have you ever tied mutton and beef bones to the trees immediately around the house where you live, for the birds? In the yard of the house at Newton,[1] where we used to live, I was in the habit of fastening these bones (from cooked meat) to a cherry-tree which grew close to my sitting-room window; and when the snow lay thick upon the ground, that tree would be alive with bluejays and chickadees and woodpeckers, red-headed and others, and sparrows (not English) and various other delightful creatures. I was never tired watching them and listening to them. Has not your heart been torn with the horrors of women's headgear this winter? I have never seen the like. It is something monstrous; every feminine biped goes feathered through the streets. I noticed Browning has a shot at these senseless women in "Asolando," his last book: -

".....What clings
Half savage like around your hat?
.....Wild-bird wings!
Next season, Paris prints assert,
We must go feathered to the skirt."

Then the man speaks; -

"you, clothed with murder of His best
and harmless beings!"

"Clothed with murder," that explains it. Poor birds! Did you notice that six per cent of the myriads of birds killed by the Statue of Liberty lighthouse were Maryland yellowthroats? By and by there will be no more birds at all. But I hope I shall be dead before that happens.

AF

In 1855 Celia and Levi moved into a house at the corner of California and Nevada Streets in Newtonville, Massachusetts, not far from Levi's family home on Main Street in Watertown. There they raised their three boys, but in the 1860s and 70s when Celia was at the Shoals and Levi was traveling, they sometimes rented the house, and they sold it in 1880.

47 State St.,
Portsmouth, N.H.
28th Jan. '90

My dear Mr. Torrey:

The book came safely back and your letters - thank you for all. I have heard from them at 148 Charles Street, they were delighted with your book as I knew they would be, and with your "charming letter"[1] - I am so glad you sent it to Miss Jewett - she and Mrs. Fields[2] are house mates, you know, a great part of the time, all Miss Jewett can spare from her mother and sisters at Berwick, for Mrs. Fields is quite alone. They are very fond of each other. 148 Charles Street's an ideal place, it's a most beautiful and interesting home, full of treasures of literature.

I send you Mr. Albee's book, *The Rose Gerardia*.[3] Keep it please. He gave it to me to give to you. I am sure you will like that poem, it is toward the last part of the book.

I was pleased with your fine Saxon expletive regarding the bird-bearing bonnets. It made me think of a story that amused me years ago. A little woman was coming into a R.R.station loaded with bundles just in time to see her train rushing out at the other end of the station. Of course she was in despair. In rushed a six foot man in a frenzy of haste to catch the same train, he also beheld the cars flying away like lightening. He gazed a blank moment after them and then "Damn the train!" quoth he. "Thank you, sir," said the little woman meekly. It did her good when her sentiments [were] expressed without [her saying them aloud.]

I hope you are quite well again. Think of the spring, so near. A song sparrow is singing over in my son John's farm in Kittery. Dear little bird. May all cats and Devils generally, spare his sweet life!

Ever yours,

Star - Transcribed from the original by DMT

C. Thaxter

[1]

Melrose Highlands, Mass.
Jan. 18, 1890

Dear Miss Jewett:

Emboldened by Mrs. Thaxter's assurance that you will receive it kindly, I take the liberty to send you copy of my book, "A Rambler's Lease." As a lover of good literature and a true New Englander, I have rejoiced in the fine quality of your stories and sketches, and especially in their constantly increasing excellence. Illogical as it may seem, because I admire your work I feel like sending you a piece of my own. I beg you to feel under no obligation to praise it, or to read more of it than you find readable and to believe me,

Yours sincerely,
Bradford Torrey

Annie Adams Fields (1834-1915), writer, charity worker and brilliant Boston hostess, widow of Celia's editor and publisher, James T. Fields. One of Celia's closest friends.

[3] Mr. Albee's book. See footnote page 30. Celia was acquainted with the Albee family who had a summer home in New Castle. She sometimes visited them there, and John Albee visited Appledore.

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Yours sincerely

Bradford Torrey.

Letter by Bradford Torrey to Sarah Orne Jewett, January 18, 1890. bMS Am 1743 (216) By permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University

Appledore, Isles of Shoals
Off Portsmouth, N.H.
May 1st, '90

Dear Mr. Torrey:

I have meant ever since I came here, the first week in April, to send you some "bird notes", tho' there is nothing particularly interesting, except perhaps the peculiarity of the place may lend an interest. But I am all the time vexed at my ignorance and wish somebody were here to tell me the different birds and recognize these delicious voices. There are more birds than usual this year, I am happy to say. The women haven't assassinated them all for the funeral pyres they carry on their heads. The martins, white breasted swallows, came promptly the first day of April and took up their quarters in the boxes we prepared for them, and very soon all sorts of birds arrived by the thousands and made the island alive with sound and motion and legions of yellow hammers, red headed woodpeckers, song sparrows and many other kinds, black birds, creepers, wrens, robins, blue birds, any quantity of a greenish yellow birds, small, and slate colored birds with white feathers in tail, a black cap and grayish white whiskers, the feathers at sides of the head had that effect! A flock of nearly a hundred blue herons alighted on a little island near us, Londoners,[1] and made the air sing with their noise. What is the bird that comes in such numbers, greenish olive with greyish brown breast covered with perfectly circular brown spots, a bird not quite so large as a robin? Some sort of thrush?

May 2nd. Yesterday appeared the barn swallows. In the hollow where the houses stand the white throated sparrows whistle so sweet! And I hear the Phoebes and many, many others whose voices I know but whose names I don't know. Anything like the joy in the voices of the martins and swallows I don't believe can be found in nature. Pure gladness without alloy. Tho' the song sparrow is so sweet and friendly in his tones, they don't begin to be so thoughtlessly gay. I heard the first sandpiper yesterday-what a

heavenly, mellow, tender call! The stillness is so profound here, (no human sounds, only when winds and waters are stirring is the silence broken) that every call of any bird seems to have twice the significance that it has elsewhere, you get the whole value of it. Until the middle of June[2] the quiet is undisturbed, then comes an eddy of humanity from the great world, chatter of voices, patter of feet, much empty sound, up and down the long piazzas, women with carcasses of the birds I love borne in sinful vanity above their faces, much that is pleasant too, for I have my own corner, my little garden and my friends, and the piazza is no more to me than Washington St. In Sept. away the crowd blows, like leaves in wind, and down comes the healing balm of quiet again upon the place. I do hope you can run down and take a look at it some time during the summer.

I had a dispute, no, I never dispute! I despise it, but a difference of opinion with a friend, about what you say on page 69 of the Rambler in that most charming chapter. Of course the boy of ten years is yourself, your memory of yourself at that age, which walks with you in your rambles today, for you say it! - "I know that those who meet and pass me see only one." I do not even ask if it is so, I know it. Yet my friend insisted it must be some child who walked with you!

The flowers are earlier here this year, Eyebright, anemone, Erythronium, etc.

How come on your essays? And have you not any more of the collection of bird poems? I have tho't of several who would occur to you, Dana's lovely "Beach" and Bryant's "Waterfowl", "The Birds of Killingworth" of course, etc. Must they be American only? There are such beautiful English verses.

Tell me if you will do anything about it.

Yrs sincerely
C. Thaxter

Star

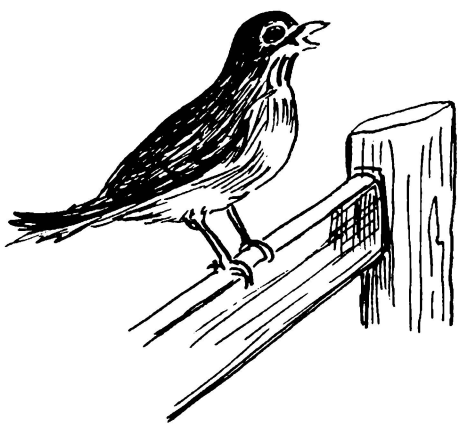
Londoners: the old name for Lunging Island, one of the Isles of Shoals.

In the middle of June the hotel season began for Appledore House.

CHAPTER FOUR

Robins are singing at the Shoals

1891



47 State St., Portsmouth, N.H.
(Undated: probably early January, 1891)

Dear Mr. Torrey:

Yes, I am sorry to say it is true that for the last three years I have been a kind of good-for-nothing invalid, simply because I went to the end of my tether and worked beyond my strength. I have always been so well and strong all my life that I couldn't believe it when the ground suddenly slid from under my feet and left me nowhere! This is the third year, and I begin to feel as if the worst of it were over and I might hope for health again. I find my best medicine is out-of-doors, so I keep out in the air every possible minute, either riding or walking all day long. So only do I purchase sleep at night. It was working too steadily for "daily bread" that brought it all about. I'm so glad to know you belong to the editors of Youth's Companion! I never dreamed of connecting you with it. It is so pleasant to know you are one of the staff. But I have written for it, now and then, for years. I laughed so much over your note and your "astonishments", if you really mean all that surprise, and I believe you do! I beg your pardon but such modesty is uncommon. Let me say here that the book I mentioned gave me more pleasure than any book written by the observers of nature, the students, I should say, who have written in this vein, not even excepting Thoreau himself, if you please! It is just what I said it was, "a book of an exquisite quality" and most rare. Did they print all my note in the Critic? I did not see it.

Yes, I do want to see you very much and Appleton Brown[1] was quite right. I do wish you would come to the Shoals! I'm sorry you didn't see Brown's pictures of it, year after year.

I'm so glad you cared about the hollyhock verses, they were written at Kittery[2] where I lived awhile some years ago. If you go to the Shoals you must prepare your eyes to see <u>not one tree</u>!

But I don't miss them there, tho' I have a positive reverence for them, their power, their patience, their beauty, their grandeur. I love them, but at the Shoals I never miss them, never need them, am rather glad to have that wondrous panorama of sea and sky unhindered by a bough, nothing between me and the farthest verge of the horizon.

I saw blue birds here, too, the first of December! Yesterday in Kittery I saw tiny olive and white breasted, gray backed birds, slenderer and not so large as sparrows. In the river a fisherman captured a strange seabird yesterday, unknown in these parts. I feel the world is turning toward spring, the days longer, the light larger. I'm so glad! With many thanks for your good New Year wishes and the same to yourself, believe me always

Yours cordially
Star Celia Thaxter

1 J. Appleton Brown (1844-1902) American Impressionist raised in Newburyport, Massachusetts, studied in Boston and in Paris. In1877 he met Celia Thaxter in Boston. They became friends, and thereafter he spent time in the summer on Appledore, and, along with Childe Hassam and other artists, painted there. One of Appleton Brown's oil paintings, *View from Celia Thaxter's Veranda*, (about 1880) hangs in the Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire.

Kittery: Around 1880, Levi Thaxter purchased the Cutts Farm at Brave Boat Harbor, Kittery Point, Maine, rebuilding the old house there. They named the farm "Champernown" Although Celia was living on Appledore in the summers, she spent time in Kittery making a comfortable home for Levi and "the boys," Karl, John, and Roland, who all lived there at various times. It was John who inherited the estate and passed it on to his one daughter, Rosamond Thaxter.

47 State St.,
Ports. N.H.
Jan. 17th '91

Dear Mr. Torrey:

Your letters are always delightful and I was very glad to have this last, and glad to hear you admire Miss Thomas as much as I do. I have not seen her volume, "The Inverted Torch", nor any collection of her work, but I seek and read eagerly every scrap of hers that comes in my way. I think she is nothing short of a genius and a genius essentially Greek, to the very heart. In some other life I am sure she lived in that classical land and worshipped at the shrines of all the high gods, and earlier yet may have been nymph or naiad, so close and fine is her sympathy with nature, so delicate and subtle her insight. I think she is wonderful! And I thoroughly admire Mrs. Slozzen's "Fishing Jimmy" which someone brought to me last summer. I think it is beautiful. But I have seen nothing else of hers.

I venture to send you a little pamphlet containing an expostulation addressed to the female mind on the subject of clothing themselves in murder, (as Browning has it) of the birds. Please send it back, for I have no other copy. Today my brother and I saw two yellow hammers among some low bushes close to the sand on Rye Beach, and last week at Kittery we saw others. They flew up and showed their yellow plumes. At the Shoals one sparrow is living out the winter like the brave little creature it is!

Do write, why should you let a whole winter go by and not do anything with that crowded notebook? How interesting it must be!

Believe me always, with thanks for your kind wishes,

Yours cordially
C. Thaxter

Sunday, This morning my brother and I drove again to the seashore and counted six yellow hammers in the swamp. Everything, every smallest thing and [....?] was covered with it, poor birds. I wish I could feed them! I am trembling for the fate of all the beautiful trees, they are laden with tons of glittering ice and many birches and willows had snapped off short, lay across the road. If the wind comes from the N.W. tonight I dare not think what may befall!

Star

47 State St.,
Ports. N.H.
Feb. 8, 1891

My Dear Mr. Torrey:

I don't know what you will think of my delay in acknowledging your kindness, but I have been under the weather for the last week or two and I would not write you till I had read every word of this most beautiful book you sent me. Believe me there is not one line, one word of it all, that I do not fully recognize and thoroughly appreciate. Alas, I have been all through this sorrow, step by step I could go with her on the way. In the little parchment covered vol. I sent you the verses "Impatience", "Her Mirror", "Compensation", all grew out of my sorrow for the loss of my dear mother, a loss to which I never can become accustomed. I don't mean to say for a moment that my verses come near Edith Thomas' but there is the same intense feeling in both. I think this book of hers, felicitous title and all, most beautiful, as I said before, and I read and reread it with a pleasure that never ceases. I thank you so much for it!

What an exquisite and elegant little book it is outside too! and so pleasant to the touch. It is a treasure.

Tell me, are you gathering pussi willows and alder catkins by the armfuls as I am here? For Goths and Vandalls are hacking and hewing at everything in the lovely wild road-sides, and I bring these darlings home and give them away right and left, such delicious tokens of spring at hand! They are so beautiful this year, all rose and silver. There's an old road called the Gosling Road, delightful name! in Newington close by, where I go for them. Such troops of chickadees I find! and prowling shrikes in all directions, ready to slay and spit them on thorns. Why must there be such deadly enemies constructed for everything that lives! What between the shrikes and owls and cats and weasels and women most of all! I wonder there's a bird left on this planet! They sent up sixty-eight snowy owls from Cape Neddick[1] below this on the coast, in a batch last month! Such wholesale butchering is something terrible. "They", I said, not the women this time! but everything that wore trousers was shooting white owls the first of winter. Robins are singing at the Shoals.

Ever cordially yours
AF C. Thaxter

Cape Neddick: York, Maine. Nubble Light Station established there in 1879.

47 State St.,
Ports. N.H.
Feb 20th, '91

Dear Mr. Torrey:

Thank you for your letter and the dear little white bells, Cassandra do you call them? To me they have always been the White Andromeda, but Cassandra is just as pretty. There are wide spaces of them in Kittery but I have seen none here about. Did I tell you of the cherry boughs covered with white bloom in my sunny windows? They have been so beautiful! Silver Willows are out all over the country and I have the golden wands in water with the bright catkins blossoming and they smell like the very breath of spring.

So many interruptions beset me my letter does not get itself finished at all! I want to thank you ever so much for the kind things you say of my work, and I understand you perfectly. Yes, the heavenly halls and various other things come from the same impulse, - "In Death's Despite," and "Love shall save us all" etc. I never cease to miss and mourn my beautiful mother nothing happens to me, tho' she went thirteen years ago, that I do not feel the old impulse to turn to her with it, and the world seems as empty as a desert when I realize afresh each time, that it no longer holds her heavenly presence.

Are you not happy in all the subtle signs of spring? I know you are! O these silver furred willows, and the others stained with vivid gold, and the peach twigs glowing pink at the tips, and the maple buds thick and ruddy and the elms growing misty at the top already, and the black birch beautiful with airy catkins, swelling and unfolding in sunny nooks in the woods, color everywhere in bare boughs, delightful to hold! Today I saw a big flock of robins in a field at Rye. One week only to March! In April, if all goes well, I expect to be off to my rock in the Ocean and at work on my dear

garden again, the first week in April. I do hope you will come to the Shoals this summer. A steamer is to run from Boston straight thither in a most convenient way to get to them!

Do send the humming bird paper somewhere! "Too long!" That can't be, you never wrote an essay "too long" yet, they are never long enough.

Ever yours truly
DMT C. Thaxter

Ports.
25th Feb. '91

Dear Mr. Torrey:

I must tell you my brother and I saw a flock of 25 bluebirds this morning, we stopped our horse and sat watching them ten minutes or more, they were alight in a field and presently flew scattering across the road just in front of us into an orchard, so that they were close to us and the trees blue with them. Their sweet twittering was delicious to hear. I thought I must share so remarkable an arrival with you!

Sat. 28th

I'm sorry my note was delayed. I wonder where the blue birds are now! But yesterday I heard one in Kittery. Have you seen any yet?

Ever your friend
DMT C. Thaxter

Shoals, April 24th '91

My dear Mr. Torrey:

I was glad to see your handwriting as I always am, and it was kind of you to let me know your change of place. How delightful that it is such a beautiful place! I came out here to my islands the 3rd day of this month and here it is so enchanting and the weather so lovely that I grudge every flying day and would fain hold fast to the skirts of each and keep it back. I have not known so exquisite an April since I was a child, it is heavenly. I wish you could be here to listen to the silence these dewy-fresh, still mornings. If a wave plashes ever so gently, or if a bird sings out suddenly sweet and clear, the effect in the vast silence is something indescribably beautiful. I am always up before the sun for I can't bear to lose a minute of any of these golden hours, and the early morning are full of such delicate glory. I want to show you my wild island. I think of you as I watch and listen to the birds. There are legions every now and then, alighting for a few hours, off again, to the continent, presently, but I do wish you could see them and tell me about them during some of their visits. Always there are so many of that thrush, did you not tell me it was larger than a song sparrow but not so large as a robin, with back of warm reddish olive brown and greenish grey breast with distinct circular brown spots, so many! I do not hear them sing. The martins went to house keeping the 5th of April, but the swallows are not here yet, nor the sandpiper, generally these arrive May lst. O the sweetness of the voices of these, in this stillness! Never was a sound so tender as the call of the sandpiper about the little lonely coves in the warm twilight.

How glad I am that the humming bird papers are to be out in the Atlantic! I shall look for them with the greatest interest. Do you not think you will find your way here this summer, if it is only to spend a Sunday, just to see the place? A steamer is to run daily from Snows Arch Wharf on Atlantic Ave. in Boston at quarter to 9 in the morning, and reaches the Shoals in 3 hours, and a lovely sail

it is along the coast from Boston here. The steamer lands at Star Island and you would take the little steaming Pinafore for Appledore, a voyage of about five minutes. And how glad I should be to see you! I wonder if I should know you if you shd. walk into my room some day, without a word! I think it would be delightful.

The steamer begins to run the 13th of June. Appleton Brown will be here in July, I think, at any rate he is to spend August here. But if you take it into your head to come, don't wait for him. You know you could come by train to Ports. if you chose and take our steamer out, the Oceanic, if it is too long a voyage from Boston.

Hoping so pleasant a thing as your arrival may be in store for us this summer, believe me always, yours cordially,

Star C. Thaxter

Shoals
May 21, 1891

To Bradford Torrey:

The "bay birds"[1] as people about here call the swimming sandpiper, are seen only in the spring, at least my brother has only seen them at this season, and he sees them almost every day as he crosses the nine miles of brine betwixt here and the port of Portsmouth. He says he sees them in very large flocks, yesterday saw a flock of about twenty-five, but sees them in very much larger flocks, and almost always accompanied by a small gull[2] about as big as a tern, which is not a tern at all, but quite different.

This gull flies with them, swims with them, seems always attendant upon them, and is not seen at any other time. He does not know it at all. There are all sorts of gulls about here, you know, but this is a rare creature.

I have only seen the "bay bird" once, and that was a single specimen that I think must have been wounded or disabled in some way, yet I could see no trace of any injury about him. He was swimming about the wharf near the landing, a pretty, dainty creature, in soft shades of gray and white, with the "needle-like beak", and a rapidity of motion that I have never seen equaled in anything except a darting dragon-fly, or some restless insect. He was never for one instant still, darting after his food on the surface of the water. He seemed perfectly tame; wasn't the least afraid of anything or anybody, merely moving aside to avoid an oar-blade, and swaying almost on to the rocks with the swirl of the water. I watched him till I was tired and went away and left him still frisking. I am so glad to tell you of something you haven't seen!

I wish you could tell me about the different sorts of sparrows that pester and delight us. They drag the sweet-peas out of the ground persistently, when they are ten inches long from root to top. There is one huge fellow, big as a robin, but "chunky", and dim in plumage; he eats buds of trees, and has a sharp, single-cutting note, something like the English variety. Then there is one a whole size larger than the song sparrow, with a striped black and white head. He devours everything.

Then there are myriad song-sparrows and "chippies" and vespers, and I am sure a pair of whitethroats have a nest among some tall bushes; I hear their brimming note, thrice repeated, continually beginning at three o'clock in the morning. Oh dear, I shall not die happy till I have had a bird talk with you! We call the white-breasted,

kind, with brilliant metallic-blue backs, martins; are we right? They build in little bird-houses all over the place. Then there are barn and chimney swallows. I have a perfect skeleton of a swallow found in a nest on my piazza, perfect. I wonder if you would like it?

AF

Bay birds - Red necked phalarope.

Small gull, like a tern but not a tern - Bonaparte's gull.

Shoals, 14th June '91

My dear Mr. Torrey:

A half written letter to you has been lying on my desk a week and I have not had an opportunity to finish it, so I begin another, hoping for better luck this time. I was glad of your note and I meant, the very moment I read your charming hummingbird paper, to have told you how delightful I found it, it is like all you write, simply delightful. What you say has a kind of flavor of out doors about it, as it were, a delicate aroma as refreshing as the scents [of] the wild green growing things, bayberry and sweet fern, clover, and sweet grasses, the pure odor of the white violet. Does this sound stupid to you? Stupidly expressed perhaps, but a very distinct idea in my mind, tho' hard to clothe in words. I think you would be amused if you knew how often we speak of you, my brothers and I, if any question comes up about birds, it is, "ask Bradford Torrey," or "you promised you'd write to Bradford Torrey about that!" It has such a peculiar effect, the sense of your impersonality, so to speak, never having seen you, I feel as if I were addressing a disembodied

spirit vaguely existing somewhere in space. But I am convinced you are no Mrs. Harris, and that there is such a person, and it makes our acquaintance all the more interesting that we have never met.

Before I forget it, for months I have been meaning to ask you -- do you remember Emerson's "Titmouse", he speaks of a bird as calling out of the woods "Phoebe"! And in the winter "chick a dee dee" do you remember it? do look it up and tell me if I am perfectly daft to have imagined he meant the same bird as having the two different calls! Of course the Phoebe and Chickadee are distinct birds, but the way he has worded his lines would lead the unenlightened to imagine them one and the same.

And I want to ask you if our cuckoo builds a nest, or only uses other birds' nests for depositing its eggs. A pair of cuckoos have been here for the last three summers, all summer long, their queer call we hear every day, but they haunt the tall bushes beyond the hotel at the foot of the hill, too far away from my quarters for me to watch them as I would like. Yesterday suddenly appeared a great woodpecker, ever so much bigger than a robin, with head of blazing scarlet, dark back, almost black the color, and ending near the tail with a sharp line against white, and the tail grayish brown, big beak looked grayish white. A huge fellow, he alighted near my brothers' garden and all our families of Martins sallied from their little box houses and flew about him in a cloud, scolding and chattering and screaming at him. He sat there, indifferently, amid the tumult for some time. Yesterday Cedric saw a brilliant blue bird which was larger than the real blue bird and brighter blue, do you think it was an indigo bird? There's such a beauty little fly catcher, we call it, black and blazing yellow that haunts my garden patch. Barn swallow, martins, and swifts were wheeling high last night: we suffer for rain, it never rains when they fly high. Two kingfishers live in the cove just in front of the house. How I wish

you could tell me about a bird I hear from the hill side, with a prolonged sweet note, with twists and turns in it, so peculiar, we speak of it as the cockscrew! Medrakes have come, they are so beautiful.

Yours ever so cordially,
Star C. Thaxter

Shoals, 27th Sept. 1891

Dear Mr. Torrey:

Thank you for sending me the article about the pine, charming it was, and I enjoyed it as I do all you write. I am still lingering on my island as you see, but expect to go across to the continent next week. I am much disappointed that the season has gone without bringing you to the Shoals! And I am so very sorry the Listener did not make himself known to me when he paid us that flying visit - had he but given me the pleasure of his acquaintance he would have gone away with quite a different feeling about the place. Two people the summer brought me who add new wealth to life, those two are Dora Wheeler Keith[1] the artist, and Richard Watson Gilder.[2] For twenty years more or less I have been writing to Mr. Gilder, a kind of desultory, broken correspondence, and we have never met till this summer. And we did have a beautiful time! And Dora Wheeler was a discovery indeed - the most delightful creature. We belong to each other and I'm sure in some other life I have had her, and Mr. Gilder too -- have you read those matchless sonnets of his

addressed to his wife, in his book the "New Day"? Most of them are matchless this side the water, certainly. When I read them I always think of these lines in the Shakespeare sonnet,

"Was it the proud full sail of his great verse
Bound for the prize of all too precious you."

If you haven't read the "New Day" do read it. Some of the poems I don't care much for, but most of them are wonderfully vital and beautiful.

Speaking of verses, I am going to copy and send you a small tribute to my pet Elodea, which I made the other day. I don't know that any one has ever sung her praises before, nor do I know if she is known everywhere by the melodious name she is called with us, but she deserves to be sung in better rhymes than I can fashion. I wish you would do me the favor to lay the poem before the editorial tribunal of the Youth's Companion, perhaps they may care to give it a corner, but I very much doubt it and if they don't want it, will you kindly return it to me for use otherwhere while the autumn yet lingers? I enclose addressed envelope for this purpose. Also I enclose some feathers I found in the top of a hillock of rock and turf which mystify me, some hawk, or the wild cat who hides among the rocks, had caught and eaten the bird, and there were white and grey feathers enough in the grass to stuff a modest pillow. What manner of bird can it be with colors of a gull and no longer plumes than these to send you?

Also I have been interested in the account an old Shoaler gives me of what he calls a mackerel bird, which is never seen near the land but haunts the heels of the mackerel schools far out in the ocean and is about as large as a plover. What can this be, I wonder!

Are you sorry Appleton Brown goes to N.Y.? I don't believe he will stay there!

Yours always most sincerely,
Celia Thaxter

I saw the Listener had quoted Albee's Rose Gerardia and I was pleased! I think I know through whom it came about. I hope somebody in the skurrying world would know how lovely it was.

After all, I thought best not to bother you with the Elodea, so I have sent the verses with this directly to the [.....?]

Star

Dora Wheeler Keith, the artist: (1857-1940). Educated in the U.S., Germany, and Paris, she studied with William Merritt Chase in New York. Mainly a portrait painter, she created designs in stained glass and also did book illustration. In 1885 and 1886 she won the Prang Prize. (Thaxter herself had won a number of prizes for verses in the Prang Company annual contests, a first prize of $1,000 in 1882. see J. Vallier, *Poet on Demand*, p. 112) Her home was in New York City. She married Boudinot Keith and they had two daughters.

Richard Watson Gilder (1844-1909) poet and editor. Writer for *Century* magazine. Editor in Chief of *Scribner's* a monthly magazine.

Shoals, Oct. 8th, '91

My dear Mr. Torrey:

No, the bird cannot have been a sea swallow, tern, medrake, we call them here, we are as familiar with these as with house flies. There is a little silvery gull not so slender as the tern, with a square

tail, a round, plump creature that haunts these coasts in summer, it may have been this. And the "mackerel birds" are not at all like tern, but like plover, in shape, size, and color, only they swim, in flocks, and these again are not the "swimming sandpipers" but are larger.

I saw yesterday what I took to be a little brown creeper traversing every inch of a cliff overhanging the sea, as a woodpecker goes over a tree trunk. Into every crack of the rock which was sprinkled at intervals with the flying brine from the billows below, he thrust his slender beak and he found a myriad spidus *[sic]* which he devoured. Every now and then he would dislodge one so large that he was forced to fly down with him and fight him on flat ground, returning instantly to the face of the rock as soon as he had finished him. Today in the storm many small greyish olive birds not much larger than wrens, thronged my piazza, perfectly tame and unafraid, the prettiest creatures! They had caps of black on their heads with a streak of fiery orange drawn straight across the very top from beak to back. What were they?

I see you are quoted in the Dumb Animals for this month from that delightful "Dyers Hollow"

My poor little Elodea is surely too late for this autumn! And I doubt if Y. C.[1] would want her at all, she isn't exactly what is suited to the paper.

With all good wishes, ever yours
Celia Thaxter

I meant to have said in my last note that Mr. Albee hails from Newcastle, not Newbury, as the Listener had it.

Star

Youth's Companion - a magazine for children.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bay Birds

1892

47 State Street
Portsmouth
January 15, 1892

To Bradford Torrey:

I enclose a grosbeak's foot and must tell you about it. Day before yesterday I was driving through deep sands and right in the middle of the road lay a dead grosbeak, frozen stiff, on his back, and with this string fastened to his leg. Poor little thing! I picked him up, and have been wondering how under heaven that string ever got itself wound around his leg in such a way. It looks as if some one had tied it there, doesn't it? I send it to you because it is so curious; don't send it back. The place was far from any houses. I am sure it caught and caused the bird's death.

I have been driving this morning nearly to Mount Agamenticus, and we saw a large flock of grosbeaks alight in a tree; they seemed to fill it full: and a splendid male in crimson sat on the top twig. I have never seen them here before that I can remember; isn't it remarkable that they stay all winter?

Thank you for directing me towards the Club in Atlantic. I am always glad to find anything of yours anywhere. Do you know all about Richard Jeffries?[1] I am just learning about him. His books are marvelous, and Walter Besant's "Life" of him, or rather "Eulogy", the most delightful thing I have seen for many a day. So close to nature he was, this poor Jeffries, and his life too short among those thing he loved so deeply. His novels do not amount to

much, I am told, but the others, that deal with out of doors, are simply wonderful and breathlessly interesting.

Do tell me what you think of this tragedy of a string.

AF

1 Richard Jeffries (1848-1887) English writer. He was the son of a Wiltshire farmer. He wrote, among other things, *The Game Keeper at Home,* 1877, *Natural History and a Rural Life,* 1878, *Wild Life in a Southern County,* 1879, *Wood Magic,* 1881, *The Story of My Heart,* 1883, (which caused a great scandal!) *Red Deer,* 1884, and *The Open Air,* 1885. His collections of essays are noted for their poetic observations of nature.

Shoals, May 29th '92

My dear Mr. Torrey:

If I only had a house of my own out here I should make a business of trying desperately hard to bring you here if only for one of your spare Sundays, to see the "bay birds" that have been round here literally by the thousands for the last month, the swimming sandpipers, so beautiful! In great flocks that wheel and turn and flying in long masses over the water show now dark, now dazzling silver as they careen and show the white lining of their wings, like a long brilliant, fluttering ribbon. I never heard of so many before, about here.

O, and I want to be told about all the birds! There's a sparrow here, longer than the white throat, very like a cedar bird, he makes a most peculiar sound, a sort of dreamy whistle thrice repeated. I wish I knew his name.

I haven't a minute to write, pardon scrawl and this feeble ink!

Yrs ever

Star C. Thaxter

Shoals, Aug. 12th '92

Dear Mr. Torrey:

All summer I have been trying to find a moment to send you a word of thanks for your letter and to say how glad I am to hear of the coming book, and then I read, (first of all in it) your article in the Atlantic and I thought it even more beautiful than the others, it took hold of my imagination most powerfully and the great gathering of the swallows singing thro the rolling Ipswich hills was most interesting. And your way of putting things so delights me, simple, straight forward, lucid as day light and as vital. I love your book. Don't ever cease to write. American literature cannot spare so fine an element. Pardon my brief and hurried note and believe me

faithfully yours
Star C. Thaxter

47 State St., Portsmouth, N. H.
24th Sept. '92

My dear Mr. Torrey:

I would not write to you till I had read every single word of your delightful book which reached me directly after my arrival here last week. Delightful it is in every sense of the word, thoroughly charming from beginning to end. There is not a dull word in it, to me it is more fascinating than any novel I could read, than any fairy tale ever written. I cannot tell you how I sympathize with every step you take on your enchanted roads, how I love to see with your

eyes and hear with your ears and think your thoughts after you. Most of these essays I had carefully read before, as they came out, but I read every word of every one of them over again with fresh enthusiasm and should like nothing better than to begin the whole thing over again and go through it from cover to cover. I shall like to keep it by me and take it up for a dip into it every now and then, for pure refreshment. I think the title is most felicitous, that little rhyme I have sung to my children, and now please my grandchildren with it. What you say in "Flowers and Folk" has great significance to me: "There is room, I think, for a treatise on analogical botany, - a study of the human nature of plants." I agree with you perfectly, here is a great field. All you say in this paper is so entirely what I think; dear me, how I wish I could tell you how I agree with you! "The human nature of plants" - I have always thought about it, but you are the first whom I have heard speak of such a thing. At the close of this paper you say - "shall we presume to suggest that as poisons have their use, so moral evil, give it time enough, may turn out to be not altogether a curse?" This subtle phrase made me think of a book I am reading, a wonderful book, *God in His World* by Mr. Alden.[1] Do you know it? A wonderful book! The one event of my eventful summer was the coming of Mr. Alden to the Shoals, where he lived among the vines in the corner of my piazza and was happy taking his fill of rest and peace and beauty. Do you know him? The quietest of men, as unpretending, unobtrusive as your hermit thrush - he looks like a simple old farmer outside, but if you look into his face you find such beauty! and his eyes are two lamps kindled at the Eternal fires, and when he speaks he never raises his voice above its low clear tone, but there is silence at once, for every word he speaks is precious and not to be lost. He read to us, one or two of us, the opening chapter of his new book, A Study of Death" - it was so beautiful! I cannot begin to tell you. Do you know him? Do you know *God in His World*? Do read it if you have not already done so. I had never seen it till this summer.

Thank you again and again for all the pleasure your book has given me and thank you for sending it, and do be sure that you have not in the world a more intensely appreciative reader than myself.

I wouldn't have a word of it changed, taken from it, or added to it, and I hope you will never cease to write while I have eyes to read and mind to know and heart to feel, and I am yours most sincerely

Star Celia Thaxter

Henry Mills Alden (1836-1919). He was editor of *Harper's Magazine* from 1869 to 1919.

47 State St.,
Portsmouth, N. H.
Oct. 14th '92

My dear Mr. Torrey,

Last winter you were so good as to send me a photograph and I wrote instantly on its receipt to thank you for it and to say how pleased I was to have it. You never got my letter at all, do you remember? So I write now to say I sent you a long letter of thanks and appreciation of your beautiful last book some time ago, and I am so afraid it has gone astray and never reached you at all, that I write again to say that I wrote before! For, if you haven't my letter, you must wonder at such a long silence.

I saw a notice of the book in last night's Transcript which did me good, and the last sentences therein echo my sentiments completely. And I remembered I had not heard from you and wondered if my letter ever reached you. It was full of enthusiasm about the book, which really seems to me better than any preceding one, charming as they all are.

I think of you every day as I go riding among the birds, troops and tribes of them, so many varieties! and so many blue birds I never saw in my life before. Hoping you are enjoying this superb autumn weather as I am, believe me,

Yours cordially
Star C. Thaxter

Portsmouth
December 14, 1892

To Bradford Torrey:

Yesterday, when my brother and I were driving through the deep woods, following the track of the woodcutters who are making such carnage among the magnificent pines, we saw a bird, a wonderful bird. Near an open space where the lumber was piled (for there is a raving sawmill down there in the very heart of the woods,) on the top of a rail fence he alighted a moment close to us. He was larger than a robin, not so plump, but a good deal longer; his wings and tail were mottled black, white, and gray, but his whole body was the most delicious red color, all his feathers a kind of crimson and crushed-strawberry, most vivid and delicate. We both thought his beak was roundish and blunt, something like a Java Sparrow. We thought of crossbill and grosbeak, but it wasn't a crossbill, and I never saw a grosbeak so long and slender, and he was all over crimson, except his wings and tail. Now what was he? Do tell us if you can.

I wanted to tell you at the time of a flight of blackbirds we saw on the 21st of October. There were thousands of them. We stopped our horse on the hilltop and watched them, darkening the sky

above, beyond us, fully ten minutes before they had all flown over. I never imagined there could be so many blackbirds in the world. As near as we could judge, they were flying northwest, but I mean some time to take a little compass to that hilltop, to be sure. It was a very interesting sight. I shall look forward eagerly to your answer about our beautiful bird. He was simply perfect!

AF

Portsmouth
December 31, 1892

To Bradford Torrey:

I was so glad to have your letter. Doubtless the bird was a grosbeak, though that first one was the largest I have seen. We see them every day in flocks of from five and six to a dozen or more. Yesterday a small flock filled a little tree, and at the top was a crimson one; such a bit of color in the sun, against the winter sky! How charming they are!

Yesterday we explored a cart path leading up to a crest from which we got such a magnificent view of Great Bay that we stopped the horse and stayed there half an hour, just to gaze at the loveliness spread before us, and it was all we could do to come away at all. The bank sloped before us to the water, and was covered here and there with trees, and these were full of birds. The bay was calm as peace itself, reflecting everything upon its opposite coasts, and the blue hills of Rockingham County dreamed in heavenly sapphire and amethyst streaked with snow on the horizon. We started up a huge eagle that flapped off over our heads, rising from some tall nut and ash trees near. We saw woodpeckers on the tree trunks, and

crows trotting about the ground. Chickadees made the still air cheery with their sweet talk; there were grosbeaks, as tame as city sparrows, and snowbirds that were not tame; and a yellow-hammer flapped his wings like a golden apparition from a dark pine. The local name for them is "harry-wicket;" have you heard it? I like it though I can't think how it originated. We saw a flock of other small birds, grayish and slatey, that flew with sweet quavering cries; they lit in an apple tree and made it alive; my brother said there must be as many as seventy-five in the flock. What were they, I wonder! What is a "siskin," by the way?

Out on the stream, where the turning tide was floating big cakes of ice down the bay (to the Piscataqua River, just round the point to the north) we saw companies of jet-black crows and snow-white gulls sitting together, shining in the sun. We saw a flock of black ducks, a couple of white geese, some oldwives, and a string of sheldrakes; they flew low and were reflected in the glassy water. Now wasn't that a lot of birds to see in a winter morning? A variety, I mean.

Two or three days ago we saw a tiny bird feeding on grass-seed by the wayside. We thought at first it was a wren, it was so very small, but it flew into a little tree and we saw it was longer, slenderer, with a long tail. It was gray underneath and dark olive-black on the wings with bars of white. It did not seem to be afraid, but somehow we couldn't get a good look at its back, nor study its general aspect as we wished. We wondered what that could be.

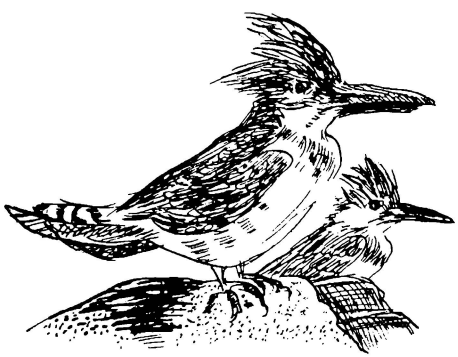
I did read the "Beauty for Ashes" with the greatest pleasure, and thank you much for telling me. I cannot afford to lose anything you may write.

AF

CHAPTER SIX

The island has been alive with birds

1893



Portsmouth, Feb. 11th '93

Dear Mr. Torrey:

I am hoping you are having a beautiful time among all sorts of new and interesting things! I have a few bird notes to forward to you from our frost and snow.

The grosbeaks are still here, we saw a flock yesterday, and I want to tell you what we saw last Sunday. We were returning from Rye, my brother and I, at about half past five in the afternoon. We saw a tree (before an old house back from the road) literally full of grosbeaks, some very beautiful with thin red in the sunshine. We stopped the horse under the tree and kept still to watch them, they didn't stir at our jingling sleigh bells or the noise of the horse's feet, or the crunch of the runners in the deep snow, they were so busy!

The tree they were in was quite a large maple tree and they were devouring every single one of its thick clustered buds as fast as they could swallow them. There was no mistake about it, they were eating all the maple buds. Poor things. I suppose they were

starving, the thermometer was at zero and night coming on. We left them there; next day we went to look at the tree and every smallest twig was smooth and bare, they had not left a single bud that we could see.

Out at the Shoals all winter there have been red-polls, they were there day before yesterday, making a great twittering and singing. Birds with red heads, Oscar calls them, must they not be red polls?

Do drop me a line.

Ever yours
C. Thaxter

Have you seen Jeffries' "Open Air"? That is the most charming thing I have found of his.

Star

Appledore, Isles of Shoals
Off Portsmouth
May 29, '93

Mr. dear Mr. Torrey:

I feel like the blackest of ingrates never to have replied to your most welcome letter from Florida! If you had all the letters I have written you in my mind as the delightful birds have come and gone before my eyes here, you would have a volume. Spite of the laggard spring, they have never been more plentiful and beautiful, and not a seed can I keep in the ground for the white throats and

songsparrows, without mosquito netting tucked up tight around all the beds! A Maryland yellow throat is building here! He did last year, and also a pair of nuthatches in the same one tree where a pair of kingbirds have built for many summers. I do wish you wd come down to this island of mine! Take the steamer John Brooks from Boston some Saturday and do come down for Sunday in June! There will be hardly any people here in June, and the steamer begins to run the 17th, I think this is the date.

I wish you would come, just to take a peep at this strange place!

When I first came in April there were lovely brown and grey birds about the size of a song sparrow with the most delicious color on their heads, a kind of soft crimson that seemed to run down in a beautiful pinkish stain round their throats and necks. I watched them very near, they were very tame, sitting on a twig and meditating, with a pleasant little soft note often repeated. What were they, I wonder?

Do come and let us have one bird talk before I die! I am almost sixty years old and everybody I know seems to be flying away off the planet. Do you suppose there will be birds, or anything half so charming in the place to which we go? Or flowers? What would life be without them? Is heaven a place? Or do we stay here, unseen? Perhaps you may be able to answer these "easy" questions as well as to tell me about the bird with the delicious crimson stain on his head feathers!

Ever yours
Star C. Thaxter

Shoals, Sept 22nd. 1893

Dear friend:

I was so glad of your letter and so proud of your liking my verses! Is Mr. Chamberlain[1] the Listener? And is he an editor of the Y.C.?

I have wished you here all day today. The island has been alive with birds of every kind, shape, and color, such a variety! Early in the day a great flock of wild geese flew over, so low we could see their colors and markings, as they floated toward the south. Then there have been scores of yellow hammers and among them a hawk that sent them screaming with terror in all directions even into the house! And several pairs of kingfishers who are here for the whole autumn and two enormous fishhawks that have perched and soared and perched again with harsh cries on the very top of the vane and belfry above the house.[2] And as for the small birds, their name is legion. There are a great many of the birds I described to you, it is certainly the Northern water thrush, as you suggested. It sings, and it teeters like a sandpiper and it is a beautiful creature. And there are so many of them! The black and white bird was certainly the creeper you mention. A black-throated blue warbler got into the house and we found him dead. Banged his head, I suppose, poor little thing. I saw today a bird not much bigger than a wren, with tail just like a wren and all over the most exquisite delicate olive green, dark above, lighter beneath, a dear tame little bird - two or three of them haunt the garden, and seem to live on grubs and things. We saw a dove today, a wild bird, colored and marked just like a wild pigeon but only about one third as large. What sort of a dove may it be, do you know?

Every day new and strange and delightful creatures arrive and alight and rest and forage for food and it is perfectly charming to see them. Now if a fog comes the lighthouse will slay its myriads.[3]

There were fifteen loons off the landing this morning! Sea birds of all kinds are flitting about. A seal sunned himself on the rocks day before yesterday. A white bat has been skittering round with his dusky comrades at dusk of late.

O, I know how you feel about your book! Haven't I been all through it just now with mine, "An Island Garden", the last pages of which I am just finishing. I wonder if everybody doesn't feel so! I am continually asking myself why I am doing it, and why I flatter myself that I have anything to say to which it would be worth any mortal's while to listen. I know every step of the way and I only wish I were as sure of myself as you ought to be of yourself! You have such a beautiful style, and all you say is so interesting.

But if you ever see my book, which will not be out till next autumn, you will get, through its illustrations[4] in color quite an idea of this Isles of Shoals which you will not come to see, for the garden and all its flowers, and sails and rocks and clouds and distant islands and even myself among my flowers are all therein represented. Mr. Gilder wants me to make from it an article for the Century to be printed (with engravings) in the spring and I think I shall do it. But always with misgivings, just like yours. I assure you I know how to sympathize with you!

Do write and tell me what you think this wild dove may be, and believe me ever

Yours cordially
Star Celia Thaxter

Mellen Chamberlain (1821-1900) Historian and jurist. In 1878 he was named librarian of Boston Public Library.

When Celia speaks of "the house," she is usually referring to the hotel. Here she specifically means the first-built (1847-48) largest and central building with cupola topped by a carved wooden eagle weathervane.

lighthouse will slay its myriads: birds flying against the lighthouse glass and accidentally killing themselves.

illustrations; American Impressionist Frederick Childe Hassam (1859-1935) was the artist who would illustrate *An Island Garden*. He grew up in Dorchester, Massachusetts, learned wood engraving, illustrating, water color and oil painting, and studied in Paris (1886-89). With his wife, Maud, he summered, and painted, at the Isles of Shoals for over 26 years.

Shoals, Oct. 2nd '93

Dear Mr. Torrey:

I send a little bird in a box, with some salt to keep him from being unpleasant! Just for you to look at and tell me what he is, - there are many of them in the garden, with golden crowned knights and flycatchers and creepers, etc. This little fellow was drowned in a pail of salt water which I kept in the path for slugs. It is so small, I am curious to know what it is.

Ever yours
Star C. Thaxter

Shoals, Oct. 12th '93

Dear Mr. Torrey:

This is such a busy world! But if I could be allowed to do just what I should like to do, I should watch birds from morning till night and bother you with questions about them! So perhaps it's as well that I can't!

Thank you for telling me about the redstart. I don't think I have seen any such gorgeous creature as you describe. But of these little fellows, we have seen dozens. One came into the house and we caught it. It was precisely like the one I sent you. This island absolutely swarms with birds, and the hawks drive me wild. Why, I wonder, when the Lord made anything so beautiful as these little creatures, he should have made hawks, I can't imagine! and cats (to say nothing of women!) to destroy them. There isn't a cat on this place, but we can't keep off the hawks, and the area is so small over which they have to prowl (which is a word, I know, belonging to beasts, not birds) that they have a horrible advantage and I never go out that I don't see feathers flying in all directions. About the water thrushes, there were half a dozen in the garden, haunting the water lily tubs, they have been here for weeks, within a day or two I have missed them. They sing, and they make a sweet chirp and they tweeter, I think they must be water thrushes. Very tame as are all the birds here, they do not fear us, they seem to have an instinct that they are among friends.

The doves, they are a little larger than a robin, plumage just like the wild pigeon, about exactly, wings and tail and all, same shape, and colors, always seen, every spring and fall, no other time. Not so much iridescence about neck as in large pigeons, same beak exactly. Every year, twice a year, a few pairs, half a dozen, say, in all.

It's of no use, you will have to come down here in spring or autumn and see these things and tell us about them. Just now there are literally legions of a little bird with a yellow spot over his tail and soft whitish mottled breast, mottled at side, white in the middle. My two little nieces[1] and I go out together and sit on a rock so still that the pretty creatures come all around us. Yesterday there were little fellows with the most brilliant yellow cheeks and a jet black band, irregularly regular, coming to a point under the beak and streaming away each side toward the tail, a chunky little thing, and oh so many others!

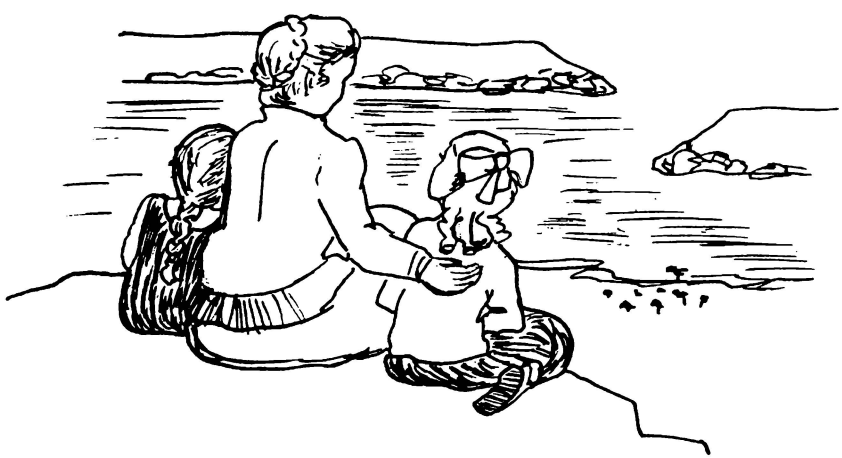
All kinds and sorts: we counted fifty; two sparrows, song, and white throats, and a larger, and a smaller kind, all together on the turf in front of the house, the ground seemed alive with them, so many in so small a space.

I'm so sorry to be going away next week to Portsmouth. I love this island so, I hate to leave it. There are lots of robins and yellow hammers about, these last hide in the chimneys (those that are capped) from the hawks, and one tumbled down, out of the fireplace into an empty room!

The boat goes and I have to stop.

Ever yours truly
Star C. Thaxter.

Cedric and Julia's two oldest daughters: Ruth (1883-1954) and Margaret (1885-1966). There was also a third daughter, Barbara (1891-1982). The girls would have been ages ten, eight, and two at that time.



47 State St.,
Portsmouth, N.H.
Nov. 12th '93

Dear Mr. Torrey:

Ever since I read your paper in the last Atlantic I have been seeking a moment in which to say how utterly charming I found it, as I always do find what you have written. Also I recognized you in the contributors club. Your book will be perfectly delightful, as the others have been, and I am longing to have it published that I may have the pleasure of reading and re-reading it.

I have been here since the 25th Oct., riding far into the woods and to the sea daily, but have seen few birds in comparison to the flocks that were haunting the Shoals all thro' the autumn and when I left, in such interesting variety. Blue birds are plentiful yet, a few robins, chickadees of course, and jays and various sparrows, woodpeckers, an occasional hawk and shrike and near the same place as last year we saw the miles of crow black-birds flying over, dashing the sky. I am going to Great Bay presently and shall doubtless see more varieties. Isn't it curious how they pause at the Shoals, so many different kinds, and make a visit, sometimes staying ten days or a fortnight!

What is the "fleabaum" of which Miss Thomas spoke in her last Atlantic article? Can you describe it to me?

Ever yours cordially
C. Thaxter

Star

Portsmouth, Dec. 9th '93

Dear Mr. Torrey:

Many thanks for your note and this most delightful Atlantic article. It is the most enchanting thing to go wandering with you, no matter where you go, and look with your eyes and hear with your ears and follow your thought! I am always so sorry when the walk comes to an end, for it always seems to me I should like to wander on forever and ever, it never loses its charm, not for a single instant. My brother Cedric who goes all about the country with me every day, was just as charmed with the paper as I was. They both want you to come down to the Shoals in May when the birds are most plentiful. - can't you manage it? Won't you think of it and try to make it possible? Can't you spare yourself a week? The place is so lovely then! Please do say you will try!

Every day we see so many birds here - my brother says "Have you told Bradford Torrey about this, and that, and the other," continually. Yesterday we saw three robins, we were quite close, there was no mistake. There have been flocks, hundreds of little greyish greenish birds with a white bar on wings feeding on weed seeds by the roadsides and in waste fields all about. And sparrows, so many! Even in the wild snow and ice storms we saw them for we go in all weather. There are lots of slate blue birds with lighter breasts and two white feathers each side the long tail. Are they vesper sparrows? Flickers we see every day, and the usual jays, woodpeckers, chickadees, etc., no grosbeaks yet, tho our ash trees are full of seeds too. Upon Great Bay the other day we drove to a lonely pine wood on the water's edge, high above it, full of herons' nests. My brother went there last June, having occasion to come in from the Shoals, and the place was alive with them, such a noise! and they flew about craning their long necks. Their plumage was very beautiful, he said. I got out of the carriage and went into the wood, of course no birds there at this season, but I looked up and saw the nests in the tree tops, as many as fifty. "Man the only vile"

comes and stands beneath those trees when the birds are there and shoots up into the nests and kills them, so they won't be there long.

Day before yesterday I saw a little [Kinglet?] with the yellow on its head, and there is a tiny bird that looks exactly like the red-start I sent you, which we see often in the wooded grounds of a rich man just out of the town, who keeps his trees full of bird-houses to entice the blue birds etc. We saw a real black bird yesterday. Lots of birds seem to be left over and belated this year.

On the 17th Nov. as we were driving at Newmarket Junction along the loneliest lovely road, in the loveliest, serene, clear morning at eleven o'clock we saw a wonderful bird in the shape of a meteor tearing along through the blue sky glittering in gold and silver and blue and green and flashing a dazzling and indescribable splendor into our eyes. It was opposite the sun and anything so glorious and wonderful and mysterious we had never seen. We wondered if anybody else in the whole world saw it!

What a long letter I am writing! Do pardon such a lengthy epistle and believe me ever

Cordially yours

Star C. Thaxter

My book[1] is coming out at Easter after all!

my book: *An Island Garden.* Houghton Mifflin & Co. 1894. By Celia Thaxter. Pictures and illuminations by Childe Hassam. Cover design by Sarah Wyman Whitman.

CHAPTER SEVEN

We shall never know each other...

1894

Portsmouth, Jan. 20th '94

Dear Friend,

Surely the flock of birds were pine finches for they flew with just the undulatory movement you describe. We saw today another large flock of the same birds in Kittery, miles and miles away from the place in Newington where we saw those I described to you, - over the river, close to the seashore, in a wood of pines, spruces and hemlocks. The ground was locked in snow but the dear little creatures were as bright and gay, frisking through the trees as we drove by! What is a dark brown sparrow with darker brown markings that we see often, a few at once? About as large as a song-sparrow, but not a song-sparrow. Every day we see yellow hammers, quantities of jays on very cold days in the bare orchards, always chickadees, often woodpeckers, oftener snowbirds; of course, always crows, gulls, and a huge eagle every time we go to Great Bay. Then there are smaller birds that we don't know. Two partridges flew across our path last week, and we saw a fox with a partridge and a hen in his mouth, scudding to covert. Next month it will be time to look for the birds - delightful thought! I read a charming paper of yours in "The Outlook" Do finish your book, and give it to us to read! Mine will be out in March, time for Easter, but alas, it doesn't amount to anything. Only it shows what a heavenly time a human being can have grubbing in the ground.

Poor Frank Bolles!' He didn't have much time in the planet to enjoy the birds and all these things we so love!

I did not mean to be so long answering your welcome note. But I am in the grasp of many cares this winter. None the less, I am,

Yours always cordially
C. Thaxter

Did I ever say how glad I was to know about the fleabaum. Of course I had seen it a thousand times, but did not know it by that name. No grosbeaks this winter!

Star

Frank Bolles (1856-1894) had just died of pneumonia on January 10th. A friend of Bradford Torrey, he worked for Harvard University as an extremely popular secretary to the University President. He was married to Elizabeth Swan and they had four daughters. A nature lover and writer, he had published *Land of the Lingering Snow,* 1891, and *At the North of Bearcamp Water,* 1893.

Ports. 29th Jan. '94

Dear Mr. Torrey:

I was so glad of your note, as always! Yes, it must be the tree sparrow we have seen, but we have not heard it, nor have we seen it in flocks of more than three or four. No, we have no goldfinches at all! We are further north than you are, you see, - would that make a difference? In the midst of the blizzard a few days ago (for we never stop for weather, but are out, "weather or no") we saw a large flock of pine finches again, and literally hundreds of snowbirds feeding on the weed seeds in a great strawberry patch. Robins we saw too, almost daily we see them. Always shrikes. Did anybody ever like these birds? Born bandits and murderers!

How wonderful about your grouse! No, I never heard the like! Don't you love to read Olive Thorne Miller?[1] Isn't her Magpie paper interesting? I was so delighted last summer when she quoted a line of mine in one of her bird papers!

"Like a living jewel he sits and sings--" I felt as if I had not lived in vain! Do you know her? She must be a charming person.

Next month D. V.[2] we shall see bluebirds! Only two days to February! Already I have flower seeds started in eggshells for my garden at the Shoals.

Ever yours cordially,
Star C. Thaxter

Olive Thorne Miller (1831-1918) Among other things she wrote *Bird of Solitude,* 1884; *Bird Ways,* 1885; *Housesparrow,* 1885; and *In Nestingtime,* 1888.

D.V. Latin: Deo volente God willing.

Portsmouth, Mch 27th '94

Dear Mr. Torrey:

I am sending you my book by this mail. It is not much, only a happy little chronicle of days and hours and birds and flowers.

I was so pleased to get your letter! Our first blue bird we saw March 6th and then all at once came all the rest in flocks, such a rejoicing chorus! Delicious and refreshing beyond telling. We have so enjoyed every moment of this phenomenal March, such color and sounds and soft airs! I am off to the Shoals day after tomorrow, D. V., and am longing to go.

I wish I cd think of a title for your book, but no matter what it is called, it is sure to be charming. Your other titles were very felicitous, especially the *Foot Path-way.* I am so glad you liked the little verses.

I am in the midst of packing and moving to and fro. You will sympathize with me, I know, and pardon the poor note from

yours always faithfully
Star Celia Thaxter

Shoals, Apr. 17th '94

We just have a mail, the first for eleven days, - think of being cut off from the continent so long! There is a prodigious accumulation - I pounce on your letter in the heap. Of course you know I am only too delighted to send you the seeds from my garden for your friend and herewith enclose them with the greatest pleasure.

I'm so glad you like the book. It doesn't pretend to be much except a faithful chronicle of a mighty good time. As you say, enthusiasm is a good thing, and enthusiasm at sixty more valuable than at sixteen, and in another year I am going to be sixty.

Is it next month you go to Chattanooga? Can't you run down and see us before or after? My brothers are so anxious you should come, they ask me every day if I have written to beg you to come. I wish you were here today to tell us about the birds! I don't know the fox sparrows. I'm sure I haven't heard them sing. There are quantities of a small thrush here, with warm brown back and spots

of bronze on breast; there's a beautiful lively brown bird with back so red by brown as to seem almost suffused with crimson, - and what is a bird almost exactly like a king bird only about two thirds as large? There are two slatey birds, one large, one small, like the vesper sparrow, of the small one myriads on the lawn, - both have the white tail feathers and blue gray plumage and black about head. Such a beautiful sociable bird has been here, grey and black with a gold epaulette on each shoulder and another splash of yellow toward the tail. The birds like king birds come singly. How stupid all this must seem to you. How stupid of me to write on this half sheet which I did not see, but I haven't time to write over again. I'm so sorry, it will be so long before our boat goes again to the land. You will wonder why I do not reply to your request, I fear. Now I must plough my way through this huge heap of letters. Do write and say you will come down to us and when you can come.

Ever yours cordially

Star C. Thaxter

Shoals, 20th July '94

Dear Mr. Torrey:

I was so glad to see your handwriting again, as always! And tho' I haven't a minute for letters, being just completely swallowed up by the human race, people and things, at present, and for two or three weeks to come, I scribble this little line, flying, as it were, to say how glad I am to have a word about your travels and yourself, and to hear that possibly a book may come of the journey, and to beg you, when the whirl of people passes and tranquillity settles

once more upon our little world, to steal a moment and slip down here and let us see you and know you, will you not? Do. - Some of us may be slipping out of this mortal state and we shall never know each other in this particular phase of existence, which would be a pity, I think!

Olive Thorne Miller wrote me such a beautiful letter about the [book *An] Island Garden,* and I was so pleased! for I admire her so much and never tho't to come in contact with her.

I wish you were here to feel the velvet coolness of our ocean breezes, for I know it is hot as pepper on the mainland.

With every good wish now and always,

your friend,
Star C. Thaxter

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